Little Wonders

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The matter is not very old. There was once a farmer named Bholu who had a field of potatoes. One fine day a sapling grew luxuriantly to a great height in his field. The plant was growing bigger day by day. Bholu was unable to figure out how such a plant could crop up in a field of potatoes and why was it growing so fast. A few days later, lots of big flowers sprouted on that very plant. Thereafter, the plant ripened and dried up. On Bholu's wanting to uproot it, the plant could just not be rooted up. When Bholu finally dug up its roots, he found a very big pumpkin instead of a potato.

Bholu wondered! How could such a huge pumpkin come out of a field of potatoes? Anyway, he carefully dug up the pumpkin and took it out. He shook off the clinging soil. Soon after, he picked it up with both his hands and headed homewards. His house was just next to the field. It was a bit dark as evening had set in. On the way he stumbled over a stone, and the pumpkin slipped from his hands and fell. The instant it landed on the ground, the pumpkin split open. Then what Bholu saw down below was a strange scene indeed! Thirteen really tiny but somewhat plump dwarfs no bigger than a squirrel, stepped out. Bholu moved back, in awe.

One of those dwarfs who seemed somewhat older, informed Bholu, "You are the one who is our master. We will do exactly what you order."

Bholu was puzzled on seeing them and had become a bit alarmed as well.

"Move out of the way and leave! Leave! Go somewhere else! You are such tiny tots. What work can you all do for me?" Bholu retorted.

"But your house is our home. Where else can we go?" they pleaded.

On Bholu's walking ahead, the dwarfs also began to follow him. His wife was shocked to see those squirrel like children trailing behind him, when he approached home.

"Oh-oh! Who are these creatures? And from where have they arrived? Why are they coming behind you?" she quizzed. Bholu narrated the entire episode to her as to how they had merrily stepped out of a pumpkin in his field.

Incidentally, Bholu had no children. His wife was delighted to see them, "Wow! What a matter of chance that they came out of a pumpkin of your field! I will look after them just like my own children and they will keep me occupied all day."

Right then a dwarf intervened, "*Maalkin*! All of us are going to do the work you assign us. And we will do several other tasks as best as we can even without your asking us, but we are extremely hungry at the moment."

Bholu's wife explained, "No, you must not call me maalkin. My name is Gauri and it will make me happy if you all address me as Gauri Ma."

The loving dwarfs cried out in unison, "Gauri Ma! Give us something to eat, we are famished."

Gauri broke off thirteen leaves and lay them on the floor. Soon after, she ladled out a small amount of rice and lentils on to each leaf platter. Making small bowls of other leaves, she filled them with water.

"Come on, eat!" she coaxed them.

At first, all the dwarfs washed their hands and faces. Soon after, the whole lot of them began relishing the rice and lentils."

"Will you have some more?" asked Gauri.

"Yes! Of course! Gauri Ma, please give us another helping," begged the dwarfs. "We have not eaten a morsel for the past so many days."

Gauri Ma doled out some more rice and lentils to all of them. The whole lot ate to their heart's content. Soon after, Gauri Ma gave small pieces of jaggery to the dwarfs. They enjoyed eating the coarse sugar bits and then the gang washed their hands, and went off to sleep beneath Bolu's *charpoy*. A little later, Bholu and Gauri also ate their meal and got up to go to sleep.

When the day dawned in the morning, Bholu opened his eyes and looked beneath the charpoy. There was not a soul in sight. "Where have the dwarf brothers gone?" he wondered.

At first, all the lovable dwarfs headed towards the barn. They climbed onto the oxen there and massaged them vigorously. The oxen loved it. Then the dwarfs went on to affectionately stroke the cows, too. In unison, the team sang a somewhat melodious song for the animals. The cows were delighted and gave some more milk. The bullocks also worked well and joyously drew the bullock cart.

After attending to the cows and bullocks even the next day, the dwarf brothers quietly sneaked into Bholu's fields by trailing behind his bullocks. With great care they weeded out the grass and went on to kill the pests which harm crops. The gang entered the sugar cane plantation on the third or fourth day, and thoroughly weeded plus hoed it. They even made the rats infesting those fields flee.

Within a week's time, Bholu's crops looked strikingly different than those of the other farmers.

They appeared so very clean and sparkling with neither any sign of wild grass and weeds nor a pest or rat. And beneath the crops, lay the clean soil which had been neatly hoed!

Gauri was so very elated. She instructed Bholu, "Do not speak a word about these dwarf brothers to anyone else or people will take them away; and one never knows what treatment will be meted out to them. They have proven to be such little wonders."

"Yes, indeed! How can they possibly do our work, in that case?" Bholu agreed. "What you say is perfectly correct! The dwarfs themselves manage to secretly do all the tasks without being discovered."

Lovingly, Gauri made identical dresses for the entire lot. When she made the dwarfs wear these clothes, they looked exactly the same. That is when Gauri embroidered marks with a different coloured thread on each one's pocket, so that all of them could be identified individually. Soon after, she made them stand in a single row and named them, "Eku, Doku, Teeku, Charu, Paanchu, Chheku, Saatu, Aathu, Novun, Dassu, Gyarhu, Barhu and Terhu."

In this manner, everyone got to know their respective names. And whoever was called, was the one who answered.

When Bholu's crops were ready to be harvested, the dwarf brothers jointly cut the entire crop in the night itself and made tiny bundles of them. Thereafter, the stacks dried up. When Bholu got them to the granary, the dwarfs worked day in and day out. They made several heaps, after threshing the wheat grains from the bundles of husk.

By the time Bholu's crops had been harvested,

cleaned and reached his house, the other farmers' harvest had not even been cut. His produce was also the best of the lot, because no damage had been done by the attack of weeds, pests and rats.

Since Bholu's harvest was the first to reach the *mandi* or wholesale market, he got a good price for it. Gauri was so very delighted. She began to take greater care of the comforts of the loving dwarfs. She was also on guard so that nobody else got to know about the dwarf brothers.

Farmers of the neighbouring fields could not figure out as to which miracle had occurred in Bholu's house, that he was prospering day by day. The team of dwarfs would do Bholu's entire work either stealthily or when darkness had set in, therefore they did not let anyone get the slightest inkling of their presence.

Now, Bholu did not have to do any task, in particular. Nevertheless, good fortune was knocking at his door, on its own. Bholu became lazy, with the passage of time. Day in and day out, he was either stuffing himself with delicious food or dozing off.

Gauri was concerned about Bholu becoming an absolute idler and so very fat if he went on eating like a glutton. If he continued at this rate, he would shortly be ridden by several diseases. She tried to convince Bholu that he should either go in for some exercise or do the farming himself. But why would he work as long as the dwarf brothers were present? And somehow he hated exercising. Gauri was tired of repeatedly trying to explain things to him.

One fine day, Gauri Ma called for all the dwarf brothers and reasoned, "All of you are so very good. Your gang surely works very hard and devotedly. I

too have become very attached to you children. But what should I do? Bholu is turning out to be a good for nothing and so inactive; simply because you all are labouring so hard. I agree that both of us are flourishing, for certain. But everyone should thrive by the earnings of the toil, they put in. Bholu simply does not undertake

any task, now. Thus all of you must quietly sneak off to some other place."

"In case that is what you want, we will have to leave. Probably, we were destined to enjoy your company for just this short span," the lovable dwarf standing in front said. "But we can actually not go anywhere by ourselves. You will have to take the course of seating us in a big pumpkin and then plant us in a far-off field, of some other farmer. By God's grace, the plant which sprouts over us on his soil, will also grow luxuriantly. We will be loyal and work hard in the same fashion for him, when that farmer digs up the pumpkin and takes us out."

Listening to his talk, Gauri could figure out how the pumpkin would have cropped up in Bholu's field. The very next day, Gauri Ma ordered a biggish pumpkin for the house. Soon after, she took out the seeds and seated all the lovable dwarfs in it. Then closing it tightly from the top, she had the pumpkin kept in a bullock-cart.

When Bholu went off to sleep at night, she quietly goaded the bullocks and drove the cart. Gauri planned to travel quite a distance before planting the pumpkin in someone's field so that news of these dwarf brothers would not reach her village.

She rode on. After journeying for roughly three hours, Gauri sighted a canal. She stopped the bullock-cart near the small bridge which crossed the canal, so that the bullocks could drink water. Soon after, she thought of planting the pumpkin in the neighbouring field of a farmer, somewhere there. She got down and lifted the heavy pumpkin from the back of the cart. It was pitch dark! When she moved ahead a bit, her foot

hit against a stump and she fell face downwards with a thud. The pumpkin slipped from her hands and tumbled down the canal's slope to some unknown spot. Gauri managed to get up with great difficulty. Thankfully, she had not got many bruises. Groping her way in the dark, she managed to reach the cart, somehow. Leaving the pumpkin and lovable dwarfs seated within to fate, she travelled back home.

"Where are the dwarf brothers?" Bholu asked the next morning.

Thereupon, Gauri pretended to be concerned, "Even I am looking for them, ever since morning! They are not to be seen anywhere around! I have no inkling where they stepped out in the dark. But I could hear some strange shrieks, last night! Probably the stray dogs have eaten them for dinner."

Bholu was miserable on hearing this news but what could he possibly do. Complaining constantly, he had to do all his tasks. He became used to the routine of working once again and his health improved gradually. Gauri was somewhat relieved on seeing this turn of events. Although for many days at a stretch, even she was grieved on being separated from the childlike dwarfs.

At this end, the pumpkin rolled over and struck a tree which stood on the banks of the canal. When the pumpkin broke open, the dwarf brothers were scattered; with some of them being carried away by the flowing water while the others went hither and thither. None of them could figure out where they had reached.

One of the lovable dwarfs reached the canal's banks after drifting with the water flow for some time.

He got out with tremendous effort. Seeing a faint light at a distance, the tiny man headed towards that very direction. Walking for about an hour, he reached the lane of a small city. Soon after, he thought of taking shelter in some beautiful house. Starving, he was in a miserable state due to fatigue. Instantly spotting a small drain by the side of a house, he gained entry into the courtyard by passing through it. Thereupon, he thought of eating something and headed towards the kitchen.

The door of the kitchen had been latched so he slipped in through a breach in the wall. Though he could smell the aroma of various kinds of foodstuff, every item had either been tightly packed in plastic containers or safely stashed in the fridge. He thoroughly searched the entire kitchen but could not find any food apart from salt, chilly powder and tea leaves which had been stocked in the open. He stepped out of the kitchen.

Soon enough, he entered a room which belonged to a young girl. She seemed to be enjoying her peaceful sleep, for certain. There was a glass of water kept next to her and a box of sweetmeats had been placed on the table, at the other side. He thought gleefully, "Wow! I am surely going to relish the treat!" The dwarf climbed onto the table and opening the cardboard box, began to savour the delicacies.

Being thirsty as well, he reached for the tumbler placed at the other end. But his head could enter no more than half or three quarters of an inch into the glass. How could he possibly drink the water? If he tried harder to take a sip, the tumbler could fall and all the water would splash around.

The dwarf sneaked into another room where the girl's parents were fast asleep. Small boxes of matches

and cigarettes were kept by the bedside of the young girl's Papa. Picking up the match-box and cigarette case, he got them one by one, in quick succession. At first he placed the sweetmeat box cover upside down, then he laid the cigarette case on it, and plonking the small box of matches on top, made a sort of ladder, next to the glass. Thereafter, he climbed onto the box

of matchsticks. Now his head was a little above the tumbler but its water was a bit lower. How should he drink, was the big question? Stepping down, he brought the girl's handkerchief. Then getting on to the matchbox, he dangled it into the glass. When the square fabric got wet, the dwarf pulled it out and squeezing it in his mouth, drank to his heart's content. He repeated the same action about four to five times and finally managed to quench his thirst! That is when he snuggled up and slept by moving a little of the blanket covering the girl's feet.

The girl woke up in the morning. As a matter of practice, the first thing she did on waking up was to drink water. The girl was amazed at the sight when she reached out for the tumbler. The cardboard cover of a sweetmeat box, with a cigarette case standing on it and a matchbox resting on top, stood next to the glass along with her wet handkerchief.

The young girl could simply not gather how this situation had come about. She had just thought of going to ask her Papa when she heard his voice from outside, "Oh brother! Who has taken my cigarettes and matches?"

As soon as the girl moved the blanket, she saw a somewhat small dwarf, sleeping away to glory. Alarmed, she jumped off the bed. That is exactly when the adorable dwarf woke up from his sleep. Keeping a finger on his lips, he signalled that the girl be absolutely silent. Then he got up and asked the girl to sit down beside him. Wonderstruck, the girl sat next to the little guy. That is when the lovable dwarf told her about himself.

He revealed, "Great adversity has befallen on me

and my brothers. You must help in bringing us together. We will be highly grateful to you. But please do not tell anyone else about us or else you never know the ordeal we may have to go through?"

The girl thought that the dwarf was correct in making this request. Anyone would want to take such small dwarfs to a laboratory and do research on them. Someone would wish to cage them in the zoo. And certainly these little people would not be able to live in peace, in case that happened.

The dwarf appealed, "Let me stay with you! I will serve you with devotion."

"Oh, you are so tiny!" the girl exclaimed. "How can you possibly attend to my needs? And, how many brothers are you in all?"

"We are thirteen brothers who have been separated by an accident," answered the tiny man. "I can massage your head. If your hair is infested with lice, I can easily pick them out. Above all, I can press your hands and legs."

Amazed, the girl kept listening to his statements.

Then he added with conviction, "I will keep every object of your dressing table which is so disarranged, in order. And of course, stack all your copies and books in a proper fashion."

However, the girl was amused on hearing his assertions. She asked, "Well! What else can you do?"

"In exactly the same way, I can do several other tasks of cleaning and clearing up the clutter. I can hoe and root out weeds affecting the plants of earthen pots in your house. Even earlier, we used to secretly do farming in the house of a farmer *Dada*. Initially those people were very happy and did not disclose a thing about us

to anyone. Thereafter, I do not know why the farmer's wife whom we used to call Gauri Ma did not approve of our doing all the farmer's tasks. She felt this would ultimately make him a good for nothing and lazy man. Therefore, on our request she stuffed us in a pumpkin and was taking us to the field of another farmer to plant us, when the pumpkin fell from her hands and split open. A canal of water was flowing nearby. When the pumpkin broke open all of us brothers were scattered in the pitch dark night. In such a scene, I was carried away by the canal's flow and somehow reached the banks. Walking, I managed to reach here."

Bewildered, the girl heard out his story. Thereafter, she thought that this lovable dwarf could become a good companion of her's!

Since she did not have any sibling, the girl assured him, "It's fixed! You stay here with me. I will not say a thing to anyone from my end, but you must take care of yourself."

Quietly she slipped the cigarette case and matchbox into the pocket of her Papa's coat. Thereafter, she entered the bathroom and sent the dwarf brother to the washroom, as well.

A little later, she went to the store where her old toys were still stashed safely. Searching the place, she brought back a doll house with its so many tiny utensils. She collected and kept them in the lower compartment of an almirah. The girl went and got several small clothes, quilts and sheets and other belongings of her dolls.

Then she guided the lovable dwarf, "Now, your home is going to be in this almirah. I am never going to shut the almirah's door completely. Whenever anybody

comes to my room, you must head in straight there and hide yourself. Otherwise, you can roam around wherever you want in my room."

"All right, Didi!" the dwarf answered, on the spot.

The young girl went on, "I will be going to school in a short while. And then I will be back home at four

o' clock, in the evening. I am going to keep your food and drink right here."

In any case, the dwarf brother's cherished wish had been fulfilled. He assured, "Didi! Do not worry about what I eat. I will quietly sneak into the kitchen and arrange for my meal. Just let me know if there is any dog or cat in this house."

"To tell you the truth, we do not have pet dogs in the house," she said. "But, a cat is often on the prowl. You ought to be on guard."

Soon after, the girl revealed, "Well! My name is Reema. You can address me as Reema Didi and I am going to love that. But what name am I going to call you with?"

"Gauri Ma had named me Teeku," explained the adorable dwarf. "It will be fine if you call out for me by that name."

Reema exclaimed, "Teeku! Well, I'll call you just Teeku. I am going to keep some biscuits, salted snacks and a banana for you. The rest is upto you. Okay then, bye."

Saying so, Reema left.

* * *

Reema was concerned about Teeku in the school, as well.

Seeing her so preoccupied, her closest friend Radha asked, "Reema, what is the matter! You seem somewhat lost in thought. What are you thinking about?"

"No, nothing is the matter! Just one of those days," Reema made a feeble excuse.

Over and over again, the thought of making someone her confidante and revealing the presence of

Teeku, was bothering Reema. However, she ended up recollecting Teeku's statement that it would not be right to reveal his secret to every other person. She was in a dilemma for a while. Thereafter, Reema could not stop herself and told Radha about Teeku.

Radha was also stunned on hearing the entire story and longed to see Teeku with her own eyes. She told Reema that she would drop in at her house, in the evening itself.

This is precisely what Reema wanted. "You must come!" she said.

Radha took a chocolate and went to visit Reema in the evening. Both of them barged into Reema's room, the instant she stepped in. Whereas Teeku hid in the almirah, in a jiffy.

Reema coaxed him, "Oh Teeku! Come out. This is Radha, my close friend. I have told her everything about you and she has also promised not to disclose your identity to anyone. Come on, do step out."

Shyly, a hesitant Teeku tiptoed out of the almirah.

On seeing him, Radha joyously exclaimed, "Ah! What an adorable tiny child. I simply could not believe what you had told me."

"Unless one sees him with one's own eyes, no one can believe that such a living being exists," Reema explained.

"Come! Come! What did you say was your name? Teeku . . . yes Teeku *Bhai*! Come here," enthused Radha. "I have got a chocolate for you."

Teeku moved forward. Radha gave a small piece of chocolate to him and both the friends ate the rest of the chocolate bar.

Radha urged, "Would you like to come to me?"

Reema answered on his behalf when Teeku kept quiet, "Yes, of course. Why won't he."

"Come Teeku!" Radha picked up Teeku in her hand and admired his features, "Oh! Every part of his is so delicate and small just like a child's."

Right then, Reema's mother entered the room with some eatables. And Radha instantly slipped Teeku into her coat's pocket.

Seeing their pin drop silence, Reema's mother asked, "What is cooking up between the two friends, today?"

"Absolutely nothing, Mummy. We were just talking about the school," Reema replied, on the spot.

"Well! Well! Come and have these snacks," her mother insisted.

When Reema's Mummy went out of the room, Radha took out Teeku once again and put him down to play. Then Radha went home, in some time.

* * *

Striking a close rapport with Reema in this manner, Teeku began staying with her. Reema was also pleased with him. Without fail, he would meticulously keep various articles of her room in order.

One fine evening when Reema was getting dressed in the best of her finery, to go out, Teeku quipped, "Didi, what is the special occasion? Where are you off to?"

"There is a party celebrating one of my friend's birthday, today. That is precisely where I am going," Reema answered in high spirits.

"Is it Radha Didi's birthday bash?" he asked.

"No! No! It is another friend's birthday party. You do not know her," Reema replied.

"Didi, take me along to the get-together!" begged Teeku. I will stay put in your pocket and just peep around a bit. I have been shut here for the past so many days and not had an outing!"

"Okay, you will also fondly remember this gala time!" said Reema, giving in to his demand. "I shall take you with me but will be forced to wear a coat over this lovely dress, to carry you along."

"Didi, the coat will look great, too!" said Teeku spiritedly.

"Okay, that is it! You need not flatter me so much! That reminds me; you must not come out of my pocket, even by mistake," Reema warned him.

"I am not so insane," Teeku answered.

Soon after, Reema shoved him in the outer pocket of her coat and arrived at the party.

Initially the friends chitchatted at the bash and then there was the cake-cutting ceremony. The gang feasted on some delicious snacks along with soft drinks and thereafter a round of dance began with lilting music.

Reema swayed as she took up the dance steps. Teeku tried to peep out a bit and that is precisely when Reema bent down slightly while dancing. Teeku Maharaj fell down, as a result. Thankfully, everyone was engrossed in their fiesta and no one had an inkling as to what had happened. But it was certainly no small feat for Teeku to walk past so many legs, stepping and hopping joyously. With great difficulty he dodged between the moving feet and escaped into the dark, on one side. He considered it improper to call out to Reema Didi, at that point of time. When his Didi would find out that he was not in her pocket, she would definitely search for him, on her own, Teeku thought. However, Reema was so absorbed in the rocking dance that she did not have the faintest idea of what had happened.

Reema simply could not recollect at night that Teeku had been lodged in her pocket. Comfortably, she sat in her friend's car and headed homewards.

On reaching home when she entered her room and fumbled into the coat's pocket, Reema was shocked to see that Teeku was nowhere in sight. Her heart missed a beat. God knows what Teeku would be going through, she panicked. What action should she take, as of now? It was simply not feasible to go back to her friend's house, so late at night and neither could she telephone her. Everyone would come to know of Teeku's existence if she rang up. What should she do? Was the question which tugged at her heartstrings.

Reema spent the entire night deliberating over this confused state of affairs. Sharp at eight o'clock in the morning, she rang up her friend, "Hello! I am Reema on the line."

"Yes, of course! What is the matter?" the friend asked.

"Well, I've left something of mine at your place," Reema spoke anxiously.

"What was it? We could not find a thing here," said the friend, confused by now.

Hearing this statement, Reema heaved a sigh of relief. She was sure that no one had found out about Teeku, yet.

"I have hidden my earrings at some spot in your house," Reema lied. "I will drop in at nine o'clock and take them."

"That is fine with me!" assured her friend. "Where have you stashed them? I can look for the pair," she offered.

Saying, "No, you will not be able to find them," Reema put down the phone.

* * *

Teeku was in a miserable state at the other end. He burst out crying when the party got over and the guests left, one by one. What should he do and how could he possibly reach Reema Didi? Was the question which upset him. Quietly stepping into that Didi's room, he sat beneath her bed, shut his eyes and dozed off. Waking up off and on, he too was disturbed throughout the night.

Early in the morning, a maid came to sweep the room. At first she was brooming another section. When she was about to broom under the bed, Teeku somehow managed to evade her sight and slipped under the table where the maid had already cleaned up. Sitting tight, he took a nap right there. A little later, he heard Reema Didi's voice as she talked to her friend. His heart leapt with joy.

Soon after, Reema entered that room with her friend. She pretended to take out her earrings already held in her hands, from the stacked books. Showing them to her friend Reema explained that since her ears were hurting she had taken off the pair and kept them at this spot, the previous night. Thereafter, she plonked on the bed.

That is when Teeku stepped out from under the table and quietly came close to Reema. He pinched her leg and Reema could sense that it must be Teeku. Instantly she pretended to scratch herself and deftly picking up Teeku, slipped him in her pocket. Her friend did not have the faintest idea of what had taken place.

"Okay, I will make a move! It is getting late for school," Reema said. "We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves in the party last night! Thanks."

Soon after Reema went home and leaving Teeku in her room, hurried off to school. Radha dropped in once again at Reema's house to meet Teeku in the evening. Both the friends eagerly asked about his past experiences, a second time.

"Poor soul! He had been wandering about from pillar to post for so long before he reached my house!" said Reema sympathetically. "Probably this was God's will and that is the reason why I am so fond of him" she mused.

"Yes, even I love meeting him and will certainly take him to my house, at times," Radha piped in.

"No, not to your place. Someone else will also come to know about him by this move. It is best if he stays put at my place. You can drop in and play with him whenever you want but we have to look for his brothers, as well. How should we go about the search?" Reema wondered.

"And yes! We have to get clothes stitched for him too," Radha enthused.

"Fine! Tomorrow after school we will go to the tailor nearby to get his garments tailored," Reema suggested.

"And what are we going to tell the tailor," asked Radha.

"We will take one of our *guddas* who is exactly of his size! Then we will tell the tailor that we have to marry off the *gudda* to a beautiful *gudiya.* Therefore he should make lovely outfits for him. How will he come to know for whom we are getting the clothes made!" added Reema.

"Yes, why not! This will be a proper course of action," agreed Radha.

"Well, then it is done! You drop in at my place after coming back from school," said Reema finally.

"Okay!" responded Radha and headed homewards.

* * *

The next day was a Sunday. Sharp at ten o'clock, Radha reached Reema's house. Reema and Radha took one of their guddas and went to the nearby tailor.

Both of them spoke exicitedly, "Chacha! We have to get clothes stitched."

"Oh *Beti*! I do not tailor clothes for girls," he answered.

"Never mind! We want the finest of clothes made for this gudda and not for us. He is going to be married off to a beautiful gudiya next week," the two sang in unison.

Hearing this demand, *Darzi* Chacha had a hearty laugh, "Well! Well! So that is the case. But I charge a lot of money to stitch a bridegroom's outfit."

"Chacha! You stitch the clothes at least. We will pay whatever you ask for," chirped the two friends.

"Well, then make sure we all participate in the *baraat* and you receive us with great hospitality," the tailor joked.

"Chacha! The girl's family is going to give you a warm welcome. And of course, if you people look like impressive *baraatis*, I will certainly take you in my gudda's wedding procession," Reema assured him.

Hearing this statement all the shop's workers had a hearty laugh.

"Oh *Bhai*! In that case I will have to make strikingly new and outstanding clothes for everyone. This is going to be a truly expensive proposition," Chacha said playfully. "But I will have to stitch a great dress for your gudda, that is for certain. You can come and take the outfits, the day after tomorrow. I have some good cut pieces with me and a perfect dress will be tailored," he confirmed.

"Chacha! At least three sets of clothes are a must," Reema added.

"I will make four dresses, *Bitiya*! It is a question of the neighbourhood's honour," the tailor said.

Everyone smiled on hearing this witty response.

"Okay then, Chacha! We are very thankful," said both the friends, taking leave.

On the third day itself, Radha and Reema went and got Teeku's dresses from the tailor. Teeku was so delighted to wear them that he began prancing about in joy. Both the friends were happy, as well. Soon after, they began talking about how to search for Teeku's other brothers.

That is when Radha spoke up, "An idea has struck me."

"What is it? Tell me fast!" asked Radha in excitement.

Reema rambled on, "Look, just as we have had clothes stitched for Teeku from Darzi Chacha; in the same fashion if any of his brothers is staying with someone else closeby, that person would have surely visited another tailor to get his outfits made. In that case, we can probably get to know about him by asking other tailors."

"The idea is nothing very special but what is the harm in trying," opined Radha.

"Well then it is final we will do this exercise on Sunday," Reema affirmed. "And go about asking tailors in the neighbourhood."

As decided, Reema and Radha went to the shops of several tailors located in the nearby bazaar to search for Teeku's brothers.

The two of them asked one of the tailors, "Our gudiya is so lovely to look at that we want to marry her to a gudda who wears grandly dashing clothes, and is quite sober plus educated, as well. Uncle! You just tell us if any girl has come to you for getting an outfit made for her gudda."

The old tailor laughed at their simple innocence and replied, "No one has yet come to me for having an

outfit stitched but the two of you must certainly invite me when you get your gudiya married off. I am going to have a fantastic dress made and gift it to her as a wedding present."

Reema and Radha smiled in return and headed towards another tailor. Both of them asked spiritedly, "Uncle! We have to get a dress made for our gudiya. Do you stitch dresses for guddas and gudiyas, by any chance?"

The tailor was amused, "Why Munni! Is it a function celebrating your birthday? I have not stitched such ensembles till date. But I can definitely make them for you if you promise to offer me your birthday cake."

"No! No! It is not my birthday. Okay then! I will get my gudiya sometime," said Radha, taking leave.

Soon after, the duo went ahead.

"Oh brother! I must say, this task is really strange! Everyone ends up making fun of us," said an exasperated Radha.

"Hey, how does it matter?" said Reema instantly. "There is some excitement in their boring schedule by our venture."

"We are going to ask just two more tailors and that is final," said Radha authoritatively.

The next tailor they went to, gave them a ray of hope, "Yes, of course! Bitiya, I am certain, one munni had come to us for getting an outfit made for her gudda. She was to celebrate her gudda's birthday and wanted four handsome costumes stitched."

"Is that so! And then what?" Reema asked enthusiastically. "Did you finally make the dresses? Who was that girl? We want to put forward the proposal of marrying our gudiya with her gudda."

"Of course! We had stitched an excellent set of pyjama-kurta, pants and shirts for him," affirmed the tailor.

"Okay! But where does the girl stay?" asked Radha, with keen interest.

"She lives on the first storey of the house which is at one corner of the bazaar," the tailor replied. "What is her Papa's name ...? Yes, of course! It is Sudarshan Saheb."

Everyone had a hearty laugh when Reema chirped, "Okay then, Chacha! In case the marriage is finalized we will also invite you for the feast."

Reema told Radha, "It is just twelve o' clock in the day. We must find out Teeku's brother today itself, which is a Sunday."

Soon after, both of them reached the house where that girl lived along with the gudda. An aunty opened the door when they rang the bell.

"Aunty, *namaste*! Is our friend inside?" the two of them asked at the same time.

"Who, Sukanya?" the aunty confirmed.

"Yes, of course! Who else can it be?" Radha and Reema pretended to know her.

"Oh beti! Somehow, she hates being confined to the house! Though Sukanya had informed me that she was going to the bazaar but I am sure she will return in the evening, after having lunch at some friend's place. Come, do come in. I have not recognised both of you," said the aunty, a bit flustered.

"No, not now! We will take your leave. Do tell Sukanya that two of her old friends had dropped in. And they will come again at six in the evening," said Reema, excusing herself.

"Which of her friends? You must tell your names or else what am I going to tell her?" the aunt insisted.

"No Aunty! We want to give her a surprise. You just ask her to stay at home, at six in the evening," Radha replied.

"Okay!" thankfully, the aunt agreed.

* * *

Thereafter, both of them went to Reema's house. Radha rang up home to inform that she was studying with Reema at her place and would return back only at night.

Instantly, they rushed into Reema's room and asked for their lunch to be served there. Merrily Teeku also stepped out of the almirah, on seeing them.

Spotting him, Radha exulted, "There is some good news for you."

Teeku could somehow figure out that apart from his brother being found, what good news could there be for him. Even so, he asked enthusiastically, "Yes, of course! What is it, Didi!"

"We will probably be meeting one of your brothers, by the time it is evening," Radha revealed.

Teeku was delighted, "Oh that's great! You must take me along."

"No, no! Not as yet! You never know what sort of a girl she is? And how she would be treating us? She might even talk about your presence to everyone," Radha said firmly. "First let us get introduced to your brother and I assure you, we will take you to him, later on."

"Just keep your fingers crossed," said a nervous Reema.

"How did you find out about him?" Teeku asked, eager to know the truth.

"Oh dear! Your Reema Didi has become a great detective and I happen to be her assistant." Radha joked. "Just wait and watch! The two of us are going to find out about your brothers' whereabouts in such a secretive fashion that nobody else is going to have any inkling about you all."

"That's splendid!" applauded Teeku. "In that case I am going to address you as detective Didi."

"Get lost! You will call me Madam Agatha Christie and not detective Didi," said Reema, bursting with pride.

Teeku was confused, "What did you say?"

"Okay, let it be. Just Didi is fine," Reema said.

Teeku's heart swayed between hope and disappointment. He quietly went and lay down in the almirah and nostalgically thought about the happy moments he had spent with his brothers, in the past.

At this end, the two friends were restless and just not able to pass the time. Both of them watched a movie on television and chatted amongst themselves. At that very moment, Reema's mother had tea and snacks sent for them at five o' clock.

"Teeku! Will you have tea?" Reema asked.

"Yes, of course! Didi, you must offer me some tea today. My head is aching because I have been constantly thinking about that brother of mine," Teeku replied.

Reema poured a bit of tea into his tiny cup and plate, and offered him one fourth of a biscuit, as well.

Teeku slurped the tea slowly. Both the friends smiled on seeing him sip the tea, noisily.

Soon after, Reema ordered Radha, "Have your tea fast. Let us get ready and leave for our old friend, Sukanya Maam's house."

Radha and Reema had a hearty laugh. The duo were thoroughly enjoying the thrill of doing outstanding detective work.

* * *

The two of them left well in time. The rickshaw was asked to stop below Sukanya's residence. After paying the rickshaw puller, both of them were very uneasy about Sukanya's reaction, as they climbed up the stairs. Reaching the first floor, Reema rang the bell. A girl opened the door and both of them could figure out that it was Sukanya, for certain. But Sukanya looked at them with questioning eyes.

Right then, Reema asked, "You are Sukanya, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am! But who are both of you? Moreover, Mummy was saying that two of my old friends will be coming at six o' clock," the girl answered, a bit bewildered.

"Yes! Yes! We made up this story. Let us come in and we will explain the entire matter to you. You must be having a room to yourself, in the house?" Reema asked.

"Yes, I do have a separate room. Come in," said Sukanya.

Going in, she put up an act "Mummy! Probably you do not know them. They are both my close friends of the past. We are going to chitchat in my room. Kindly have some snacks sent to my room."

"Okay!" her mother replied.

The three of them walked into Sukanya's room. Reema and Radha thoroughly examined the entire room with their eyes so that they could find some clue of the presence of Teeku's brother. But they could not see a thing and even the almirah was tightly shut.

"Why, what is the matter? Who are you looking for by minutely scanning my room?" asked Sukanya, now on guard.

That is when Reema gave her an indication that they had come after taking her address from Uncle Darzi.

"Okay! But what is the matter?" Sukanya asked, puzzled.

"We have found out that there is some handsome gudda living with you. And you have got four dresses stitched for him," revealed Reema.

"Yes, of course! I have got them made. So what?" replied Sukanya.

"Our gudiya is lovely looking and accomplished," chirped Radha. "We have come to talk about her marriage proposal with your gudda."

"Oh dear! Talk sense. Why have you people barged in here? Do not make a fool of me with such childish talk." Sukanya, seemed a bit annoyed.

Now, both the friends deeply thought about what they should be telling her. If they straightaway asked about Teeku's brother, his secret would be let out. They wondered whether his brother was living with Sukanya.

Right then, a girl walked in with sherbet and snacks, and thankfully they got a chance to think over the matter. While sipping the sherbet, Reema spotted a small glass lying in a corner. She figured out that most probably it belonged to Teeku's brother. She pointed out the glass to Radha with a gesture.

Radha got up and brought the glass. On inspecting it carefully, she found some dried up milk stuck to its base.

"Hey! Who does this glass belong to?" Radha asked aloud.

Now it was Sukanya's turn to be startled, "It doesn't matter, the glass is my gudda's property."

"Does your gudda happen to drink milk?" Radha remarked, and had a hearty laugh.

That is when, Reema felt that it was better to unravel the mystery. She admitted, "Oh dear! Both of us had walked in here, to search for a child dwarf. Tell us the truth. Is there a somewhat tiny dwarf in your house as big as a gudda?"

"We very well know that it is a top secret. And we promise that no one will have the slightest inkling of this matter," assured Radha.

Instinctively, Sukanya exclaimed, "Okay, so his brother is at your house. Now I understand!"

"Yes, of course! You have figured out correctly," said a relieved Radha.

"In that case, you should have told me earlier! Why were you two talking in riddles?" asked Sukanya. "Not at my place! But of course a dwarf brother had arrived from some place at one of my friend's place which is at Swarup Nagar. Being very fond of the little wonder, I bring him here at times. I play and chat with him throughout the day and even serve him milk in this very same glass. Thereafter, I drop him home in the evening or that friend of mine comes to pick him up. Nobody else has the slightest clue about him except my friend and me."

"Okay, so that lovable dwarf is staying at your friend's house," Reema confirmed.

"Of course! He is right there," said Sukanya. A few days back, that friend of mine had told me to get some clothes stitched for him. I had asked the tailor to sew some dresses for my gudda and had them made, at that point of time. How wonderful! This is a great coincidence. We have found our Eku's brother," Sukanya enthused.

"Yes! Certainly! Eku and Teeku are both going to be delighted when they meet each other," said Radha.

"But they are thirteen brothers in all," Sukanya piped in.

"Well, there are thirteen of them!" Reema mused. "Two of them have been found today and we will certainly spot more of them if we make a joint effort."

"Oh God! I do hope they are all alive and safe," Radha prayed.

"Now, what should be our next course of action?" asked Reema.

Sukanya revealed her plan, "Tomorrow, the two of you come to my house, the instant school gets over. We will board a rickshaw from here itself and go to Ruksana's place."

Reema was a bit confused, "Ruksana?"

"Oh, that reminds me! I simply forgot to tell you that my friend's name is Ruksana, at whose house Eku is staying," Sukanya clarified.

"Shall we take Teeku along with us?" asked Reema.

"No, not as yet," Sukanya was firm.

"Okay then! We will take your leave," said Radha and Reema. And both the friends merrily set off for their respective houses.

* * *

On reaching home, Reema narrated the entire incident to Teeku. Though happy, Teeku was a bit dejected; it would still take quite some time before he could get to meet his brother. He asked right, "Which of my brothers was he?"

"Sukanya told us that his was name was Eku," Reema replied.

"Okay, so that Didi's name is Sukanya," said Teeku.

Reema was simply not able to sleep because she was anxiously thinking about the next day. Instantly Teeku offered, "Come Didi! I will massage your head and it will help you sleep soundly. Kindly keep a towel under your head and lie down."

Reema did exactly as she was told. Teeku excellently massage her head with such vigour that she felt drowsy in a short while and went off to sleep.

When she got up in the morning Reema observed that Teeku had meticulously cleaned her dressing table and kept all the things in order. Her writing copies and books had also been neatly stacked in one corner. All the stuff like bits of paper strewn about the place, had been picked up. Reema was really pleased. She was still in the bathroom when her mother entered the room. Seeing everything spotlessly clean and set in place, she was truly happy. Addressing Reema from outside the washroom, she applauded her for keeping the room so spick and span.

Reema smiled to herself in the washroom on hearing her praise but did not utter a word.

Soon after, telling her mother that she would come home late that day, Reema left for school. She would go to Radha's house after studies and would return home only at night, she added.

At this end, Radha explained to her mother that even she would return home late at night. Straightaway, she would go to Reema's house from school.

* * *

As soon as school got over, Reema and Radha hired a rickshaw and directly arrived at Sukanya's place. Even Sukanya had reached home and was snacking. Her mummy served snacks to everyone. Thereafter, Sukanya told her mother that they were going to Ruksana's house. She had told Ruksana in school itself that the three of them would be coming over to meet Eku.

Ruksana was eagerly waiting for them at the gate. On seeing Sukanya, she greeted her, "Hello!"

"Let me introduce you to both of them!" Sukanya said. "This is Radha and that is Reema. And of course, this is Ruksana, my best friend," she added.

Everyone smiled and said "Hello!" to each other.

"So Teeku, our Eku's brother happens to be at your place!" Ruksana remarked.

"Yes! Definitely! Teeku stays at Reema's house." Sukanya confirmed. "Even she has not revealed his identity to a single soul. Only these two friends know about his whereabouts."

The foursome went in and said *aadaab* to her *ammi*.

Ammi said, "*Jeete raho*!" and blessed them.

Soon after, without looking in any direction they barged into Ruksana's room.

Ruksana had a very huge old bungalow with a large courtyard enclosed by rooms on all four sides. Ruksana shut the door when they entered the room. Then she called out to Eku who came out in a jiffy.

"Wow! That's great! He is an exact copy of our Teeku," said Reema excitedly.

"Didi, why wouldn't I be a replica. Teeku is my brother, after all! Ruksana Didi has given an account of the entire episode to me," revealed Teeku, chirpily.

All of them smiled, amused at his lively prattle.

"You didis are so very genuine! At least, you have given me the news of one brother. Now I am convinced that all of us brothers will get together, once again," rattled Eku, yet again.

Hearing his clever comments, Radha smiled and responded, "Our faith has combined with your trust and become an absolute conviction."

Everyone guffawed on hearing this statement.

"Are you liking the set up here?" Reema asked.

"Why won't I enjoy staying at this place? Didi Ruksana takes the utmost care of my needs! Just have a look at my new outfit!" exclaimed Eku. "But the absence of my brothers definitely hurts me."

Radha tried to divert his attention, "O, wow! How perfect is this dress of yours!"

"Well! All of us are jointly going to find your brothers, for certain. But tell us whether you are going with us now to meet your brother Teeku?" asked Radha.

"I will definitely accompany you, if Ruksana Didi says so," Eku responded.

Precisely then, there was a knock at the door. Immediately Eku hid beneath the bed.

"Well *Bibi*! Why have you shut the door?" asked the *khansama's* wife, walking in with a tray.

"We were just wondering how the drama is to be enacted in the coming annual function; and how Reema will be taking part in it." Ruksana put up a pretence.

"Oh, that's great! Can I too be a spectator?" the head cook's wife asked eagerly.

"No! If you watch the action now its not going to be enjoyable when we take you to see the play." Ruksana said firmly.

"What say, Bibi! Will you take me also for seeing the play?" the khansama's wife asked eagerly.

"You will never be able to forget the grand show! We are going to take you along, this time round." Ruksana assured her.

"Wow! In that case I will thoroughly enjoy myself!" the khansama's wife was delighted.

"Okay! Okay! Now you better go out and let us get along with our work," Ruksana ordered.

When she left the room happily, everyone's conference started all over again. And they feasted on the sumptuous snacks, at the same time.

Reema decided, "Well then! I am going to take Eku with me, today. Both the brothers will be delighted to meet each other."

"But I am going to bring him back from your house,

tomorrow evening," Sukanya was adamant. "How would you know of the relaxing head massage which Eku gives."

"Okay, I will take your leave now. Come Eku! Will you come along with me to meet your brother?" Reema asked.

"Why not Didi!" Eku replied, excitedly. "This is truly my heartfelt wish."

"Goodness gracious! You have begun talking so seriously just like a real grown up," Radha commented.

"Didi! Actually speaking, I have learnt this art from all of you," Eku replied wittily.

Hearing this statement, everyone laughed aloud.

Thereafter Reema put Eku in her coat's pocket and stepped out. Even Radha and Sukanya went back to their individual homes.

* * *

As soon as Reema reached her house, she saw *Bua* sitting right in front with her mummy.

"Namaste Bua! When did you drop in? You gave no notification of your visit," asked Reema surprised at her sudden arrival.

"Do you have any idea of what is going around in the mundane around you! God knows which world you are living in! Just the day before, Papa had informed us that Bua would be coming to stay with us," said Reema's Mummy, amazed at her absentmindedness.

"Probably, I didn't hear him," Reema replied.

"You did not listen or were you preoccupied," Reema's Mummy rattled on.

"Oh, gosh! You are surely getting after her life! She

is just a child! And has other engagements with her friends, apart from studies! Isn't it Reema!" Bua tried to pacify the situation.

"Oh, no Bua! It just happened, somehow," Reema made a lame excuse.

"Okay, forget it! Come close and hug me! How beautiful is my niece!" Bua remarked.

Reema went to her and cautiously wrapped her arms around Bua so that she did not get to know about Eku. "I will be back, in a second," Reema excused herself.

Saying so, as soon as Reema entered her room she noticed that Bua's suitcase and bag were kept right there. Would she be sleeping in her bedroom, Reema wondered? How would she be able to hide the presence of Teeku and Eku from Bua. What should she do, as of now?

Stepping out, she reconfirmed, "Well Bua! You will also be sleeping in my room, isn't it?"

"Definitely! Where else should I sleep apart from lying down next to my *bitiya*? The two of us are going to chat away to glory. Thereafter, you can study because it causes no disturbance to me," Bua said fondly.

"Yes, of course! We are surely going to have a gala time. This time you are going to stay over for several days, isn't it?" asked Reema cleverly.

"Yes, I will be stopping over for at least a week," Bua's reply was prompt.

Now Reema was worried as to what course of action, she should take? How on earth should she save Teeku and Eku from the sharp eyes of Bua? Soon after, she hurried to her room and taking out Teeku from the almirah, whispered, "Though I have got your brother Eku along but I can not let you two meet, as yet. In my opinion, I have to drop both of you at Sukanya's place just now, or else Bua will get to know about the entire scene. Come, get ready fast," Reema urged.

"I am ready, in any case," Teeku replied.

Reema put Teeku in the other pocket of her coat. Coming out, she made an excuse, "Mummy, there is a

test in school tomorrow and I have to get an exercise book from Radha, right now."

Making this statement, she stepped out without waiting for Mummy's answer.

She reached Sukanya's house in a rickshaw. The door was wide open and Sukanya's Mummy stood right in front.

"Oh, it's you! So late at night?" asked Sukanya's mother, amazed to see her.

"Well, I had some important work with Sukanya," Reema answered.

"Yes, of course! She is right there in her room," Sukanya's mother was helpful.

"Thank God!" Reema heaved a sigh of relief. "She has not gone anywhere."

Straightaway Reema barged into Sukanya's room, "Just shut the door Sukanya! Thereafter, I will explain why I have dropped in, so late at night."

Sukanya got up to close the door. Soon after Reema took out Teeku plus Eku from both her pockets and made them stand on the carpet. After so many days, both the brothers had met each other. Teeku warmly hugged Eku, and the duo sobbed quietly. Even Reema and Sukanya were teary-eyed on seeing their union.

"Now the two of you sit and chat in the almirah. You never know, someone might walk in," said Reema, on guard.

"Well, Reema! How come you dropped in here, bringing both of them?" asked Sukanya, confused by now.

"Oh! By the time I reached home, Bua had come over and she was going to stay in my room itself. What could I have done? How could I have possibly saved

Teeku and Eku from her sharp observation. That is why I felt it was better to get them over to your place," Reema revealed.

"Yes, yes! You did the right thing but we will have to leave them at Ruksana's place tomorrow. Her house is really big and no one usually visits her room," Sukanya opined.

"That's fine! But they can stay at your house till we come back from school," Reema wanted to be sure.

"Yes, of course! I will shut them both in the almirah and lock it before leaving for school," Sukanya assured.

"Well I will make a move. It is really very late," said Reema, taking leave.

Quickly Reema stepped out and got down from the stairs. She had just called out to the rickshaw man when it struck her that she had made the excuse of getting copies to her Mummy, and then left. Asking the rickshaw puller to wait there, she climbed up the stairs once again.

"What happened, how have you come back?" Sukanya asked somewhat surprised.

"I say, just get an exercise book from inside and hand it over to me. At home, I pretended in front of Mummy that I needed to get a copy," Reema explained.

Sukanya got a copy and gave it to Reema. Thereafter Reema got down from the stairs, hurriedly sat in the rickshaw and headed back.

* * *

At night, she felt a strange vacuum deep in her heart even though Bua was with her. It seemed as if Teeku had become a part of her daily regime.

Right then, Bua thought of hanging some clothes in Reema's almirah. Seeing the quaint doll's house and various tiny utensils, she was amazed, "I say, Reema! You play with these toys, even now?"

Reema feigned embarrassment, "Yes Bua! I am fond of these old play-things."

Amused, Bua began laughing, "You will continue to be a child at heart."

Thereafter, both of them talked of old times, late into the night.

Even the next day, Reema told her Mummy she would be back late at night and left for school. As soon as school got over, she reached Sukanya's house along with Radha. Sukanya was absolutely ready and waiting. Reema put Teeku safely in her pocket whereas Eku was already in Sukanya's pocket. Soon after, all three of them sat in the same rickshaw and reached Ruksana's house.

In any case, Ruksana was waiting for the three of them. In the school itself, Sukanya had disclosed their entire plan to her. Straightaway they went to Ruksana's room. Shutting the door, they took out Teeku and Eku. The two brothers were very happy. They chatted away to glory, after sitting in the almirah.

At this end, these friends were busy contemplating how to find out about the other brothers.

That is when Ruksana said, "My brother Shameem was asking me yesterday whether I had heard about dwarfs, at any point of time. When I inquired about the reason for this question, he revealed that one of his friends often saw two small dwarfs in his dreams. I evaded him by saying that dwarfs do not exist in reality. It is just that the tale of 'Gulliver's Travels' which

features dwarfs, is very famous. His friend must have had such a dream after hearing this story, in particular."

"Okay, then what happened?" quizzed Reema.

Ruksana continued, "But later on, I wondered if two brothers of Teeku and Eku were staying at the house of Shamim's friend. And by talking about his dream

in this fashion he would be testing others, to find out whether there was another brother of these dwarfs in their house."

"Yes, of course! It is possible. Where does this friend of Shamim stay?" asked Reema, curious by now.

"He has a farm-house on the outskirts of this city and he lives there," said Ruksana.

"His friend must be very rich!" exclaimed Reema, quite impressed.

"Could be but it is not certain. His farm-house may have been bought a long time back," Ruksana remarked.

"So, why don't you persuade your brother and get some more information," urged Reema.

"I will work in this direction," Ruksana assured.

Thereafter, Reema, Radha and Sukanya left for their respective homes.

* * *

For quite some time, Ruksana contemplated as to how they could find out about the other dwarf brothers. Finally she reached the conclusion that Shamin must be taken into confidence, and they should talk to his friend only after taking Shamim's help.

At this end, both the brothers chatted about everything possible. There was no sign of them feeling drowsy.

However, Ruksana, dozed off while studying. Both the brothers supported each other and put off the bed switch with great difficulty by keeping books underneath. Soon after, they also went to sleep.

Eku and Teeku woke up quite early in the morning. Ruksana was still asleep when both of them had perfectly

set the whole room. They had kept all the objects of her dressing table in order. The exercise and text books had also been stacked properly. Even the bathroom's toiletries had been placed in a proper fashion.

In the morning when Ruksana's mother came to wake her up, she was pleased to see her bedroom so spick and span. That's wonderful! My daughter has become so very methodical and begun keeping everything systematically. She called out to Ruksana and woke her up, fondly kissing her on the forehead.

The instant Ruksana saw all the objects of her room kept in perfect order she understood the entire scene. She joyously promised, "Ammi, just watch! From now onwards you will find all my things meticulously arranged." Saying so, she smiled complacently and even her Ammi left with a smile.

* * *

All three of them, Reema, Radha and Sukanaya, reached Ruksana's house on a Sunday, sharp at ten o' clock.

"Hello, Teeku and Eku! How have you been?" Reema asked.

"Didi! We had a great time today. Both of us are going to sing a song which we used to hum earlier and dance for you people," the two brothers affirmed excitedly.

When the duo danced merrily on a folk song, everyone burst into splits of laughter. Their affected dance movements, their style of twirling around and their quaint mannerisms were thoroughly enjoyable. It was not easy to understand the song's words but their tune was melodious.

"Okay, now both of you can play around while we discuss how to go about finding your brothers," Sukanya suggested.

Both Eku and Teeku went to the other side. Thereafter, all the friends seriously began consulting each other as to how to they should settle the matter.

Ruksana opined, "We will have to coax Shamim to make further inquiries about the dwarfs from his friend."

"But why would he agree to make such a query unless he firmly believes that such wondrous dwarfs exist," Radha reasoned.

"Well, it is finalised!" said Sukanya. "We will get him to meet Teeku and Eku, and instruct him not to let out their secret to anyone. He will have to be taken into confidence and only then the current situation is going to improve."

"Yes, this is exactly the course of action we should adopt." Radha was supportive. "What is his friend's name?"

"Shamim was saying that his name is Yuvraj. So, should I call Shamim?" Ruksana asked.

"Right now?" Reema was uncertain.

"Why not! The sooner we act the better it is," Ruksana was sure of taking this step.

"It is done, call for him." Reema decided.

"Okay! I will go and have a look outside," Ruksana volunteered.

Stepping out, she told Shamim, "Bhai, kindly come into my room! There is some important work to be done."

"I can not come at the moment," Shamim shot back. "Can't you see I am putting on my cricket shoes and going out to play cricket."

"Just for a short while, say about five minutes," Radha coaxed.

"All right! I will come in," said Shamim.

When Shamim entered the room he was somewhat embarrassed to see Reema, Radha and Sukanya watching him very intently.

"Well, speak up! What work do you have? Do you all want me to get something?" Shamim inquired of them.

"No, not at all! We are going to unveil a deep secret to you. But you must promise that you won't disclose it to anyone, and neither will you make any mention of the subject to any soul," Ruksana persisted.

"That is fine, but do tell me the mystery," Shamim responded, keen to know the truth. "I promise not to tell any person without consulting all of you."

Ruksana called out to Eku and Teeku, precisely at that point of time. They stepped out of the almirah and came out.

"*Aadaab* elder brother!" both of them greeted Shamim courteously as they had been listening to the conversation.

Seeing the duo, Shamim gaped in wonder. "Oh *Aapa*! You used to say that dwarfs exist only in fairy tales then how could they possibly come here."

"Anyway, this is a long story and I will narrate the entire incident to you, later on. But we do not want to unravel their mysterious presence, right now. You never know what treatment the people might meet out to them once they get to know of their existence. The staff of some countries' laboratories can take them away to do various experiments on the lot. There is even a possibility of showcasing the dwarfs in the zoo. One never knows what ordeal they may have to go through. All the brothers will not be able to stay together under one roof, that is for certain," said Ruksana, summing up the situation.

"Aapa, what are you saying? How many brothers are they in all," asked an astonished Shamim.

"They seem to be thirteen brothers from whatever information I could gather from them. All of them met with a strange accident and separated from each other by drifting in a canal. Reema got one of them and I came across another, as a matter of chance. Thereupon, Reema joined hands with her friend Radha and intelligently found my Eku," disclosed Ruksana.

"This is surely sounding like a very enjoyable tale. Well, do let me know what you all want from me?" said Shamim, trying to help out.

"We suspect that two of their brothers are with that friend of yours...what is his name . . . yes Yuvraj. They can possibly be at his farm-house and that is precisely why he was telling you that he saw two dwarfs in his dreams. You have got to find out the entire scene and make these two brothers Teeku and Eku meet up with them," Ruksana urged.

"Yes, of course! Probably he was testing me to find out whether I knew about the other dwarfs, by confirming that he had seen two such dwarfs in his dream," Shamim responded.

"It is a possibility," said Ruksana.

"Okay, it is done. I am going to talk to him in school, tomorrow," Shamim promised.

"Well, you must be knowing who else stays with him in the farm-house?" asked Ruksana.

"He is alone by himself, these days. His parents have gone abroad for a span of three months. There is just a gardener and a servant who work for him," Shamim revealed.

"In that case, there is a greater chance of Teeku and Eku's brothers being there. All right! You go and play the game of cricket now. Do let me know whatever you find out tomorrow," Ruksana asked his favour.

"Okay, Aapa!" Shamim agreed to help out.

"And that reminds me, do not tell him about Teeku and Eku, right now. If possible visit his farm-house under some pretext," Ruksana suggested.

"I will try, for certain," said Shamim, before taking leave.

* * *

Though Shamim and Yuvraj studied in the same class, their desks were a bit far from each other. At lunch break, the next day, Shamim met Yuvraj, "*Yaar*! One can not catch up with you, even on a Sunday. The cricket match we had yesterday was great, but all of us were definitely missing you. If we had a fast bowler like you in our team, we would have won, for sure," said Shamim, praising him.

"So, did your team lose, finally?" Yuvraj was concerned.

"Yes, but just by eleven runs," answered Shamim.

"Well, it's done. Even I will come to play in your team, next Sunday," affirmed Yuvraj, eager to join in.

"Yes, of course. This is precisely what we want. Anyway, tell me something. What actions would the dwarfs do in the dream which you had of them?" asked Shamim, cleverly.

"How come you are reminded of the dwarfs, once again?" asked Yuvraj, somewhat surprised.

"Well, there is no reason, in particular! My mind says at times, that even dwarfs exist," answered Shamim.

"Your mind comes up with all kinds of crazy thoughts," Yuvraj commented.

"Oh! Come on, you must tell me! What would those dwarfs do?" Shamim was persistent.

"How can I possibly remember such an old dream? Yes, they would work in the fields and undertake all the tasks of some farmer," revealed Yuvraj.

"All right! Now I understand," said Shamim.

"But why are you showing such keen interest in the dwarfs' dream?" asked Yuvraj, now on guard.

"Dear friend! The truth is that I was talking to my Aapa yesterday. There was some mention of dreams at that point of time. When I told Aapa that one of my friends often sees two tiny dwarfs in his dream, she asked me frankly if it was a true fact? Thereafter, she affirmed that even she had dreamt of dwarfs, a few days back. And she added that I must ask my friend what regime the dwarfs would follow on a daily basis. That is the reason I am asking you," said Shamim, giving a detailed explanation.

Yuvraj somewhat figured out the matter. He told Shamim, "I would like to meet your Aapa. I do hope she has no objection."

"Okay! I will ask Aapa and let you know," Shamim replied

Thereafter, both of them went to their class.

* * *

Going home, Shamim narrated the entire conversation he had had with Yuvraj.

Ruksana was excited, "In that case, I can surely bet that two brothers of Teeku and Eku are at Yuvraj's house. Even these two undertook the work of a farmer, earlier. That is exactly what Eku had told me."

"That is precisely what I also feel," Shamim supported her point of view.

"Now, we must clearly talk to Yuvraj. Probably he also wants that all the brothers should get to meet each other. You must explain to him that I won't be able to come to your farm-house tomorrow but we can

definitely meet at the Metro Restaurant, at four-thirty. We can discuss the entire subject there itself," Ruksana added.

"Aapa, that seems fine! Sharp at four thirty, I will come with Yuvraj to the Metro Restaurant. Even you must drop in right there, from school," confirmed Shamim.

"Yes, of course! Why not! Even I do not have much to do, on reaching home early," Ruksana agreed to the plan of action.

* * *

Both the friends sat in a cabin of the Metro at four-thirty in the evening. Ruksana also ventured there, a little later. Seeing her, Shamim called Aapa to the cabin.

Soon after, he introduced them to each other, "Yuvraj, this is Ruksana Aapa! And this of course is Yuvraj, my friend."

Ruksana was cordial, "It is a pleasure meeting you, Yuvraj."

"It is great for me, as well!" Yuvraj replied warmly.

That is when the waiter arrived to take the order.

"What would you like to eat? Yuvraj, tell me!" Ruksana asked pleasantly.

"Whatever you feel like," Yuvraj answered politely.

"Well, then! Get us three cold drinks and three freshly baked patties," Ruksana told the waiter.

"All eatables here are made fresh everyday," the waiter was prompt in responding.

"That's all right, you can go," said Ruksana, dismissing him.

Thereafter, Aapa revealed, "Yuvraj! Look even I had

a dream of dwarfs and there too the dwarfs were doing farming. They would massage cows and bullocks, and go off to sleep beneath the farmer's charpoy. What is the meaning of this scene?"

"That sounds great, Aapa! It implies that you too have dwarfs in your house," quipped Yuvraj.

"In your house, as well! Which means that even you have dwarfs at your place?" Ruksana clarified.

"Yes Aapa! Your assumption is correct. Rambling through the fields, two dwarfs walked into my house, one fine day. They have been staying with me, ever since. I am frantically searching for their brothers very much like you and truly wish that all of them get to meet each other," said Yuvraj, detailing his side of the story.

"And that reminds me, in such a way that no one gets to know about their existence," said Ruksana cautiously.

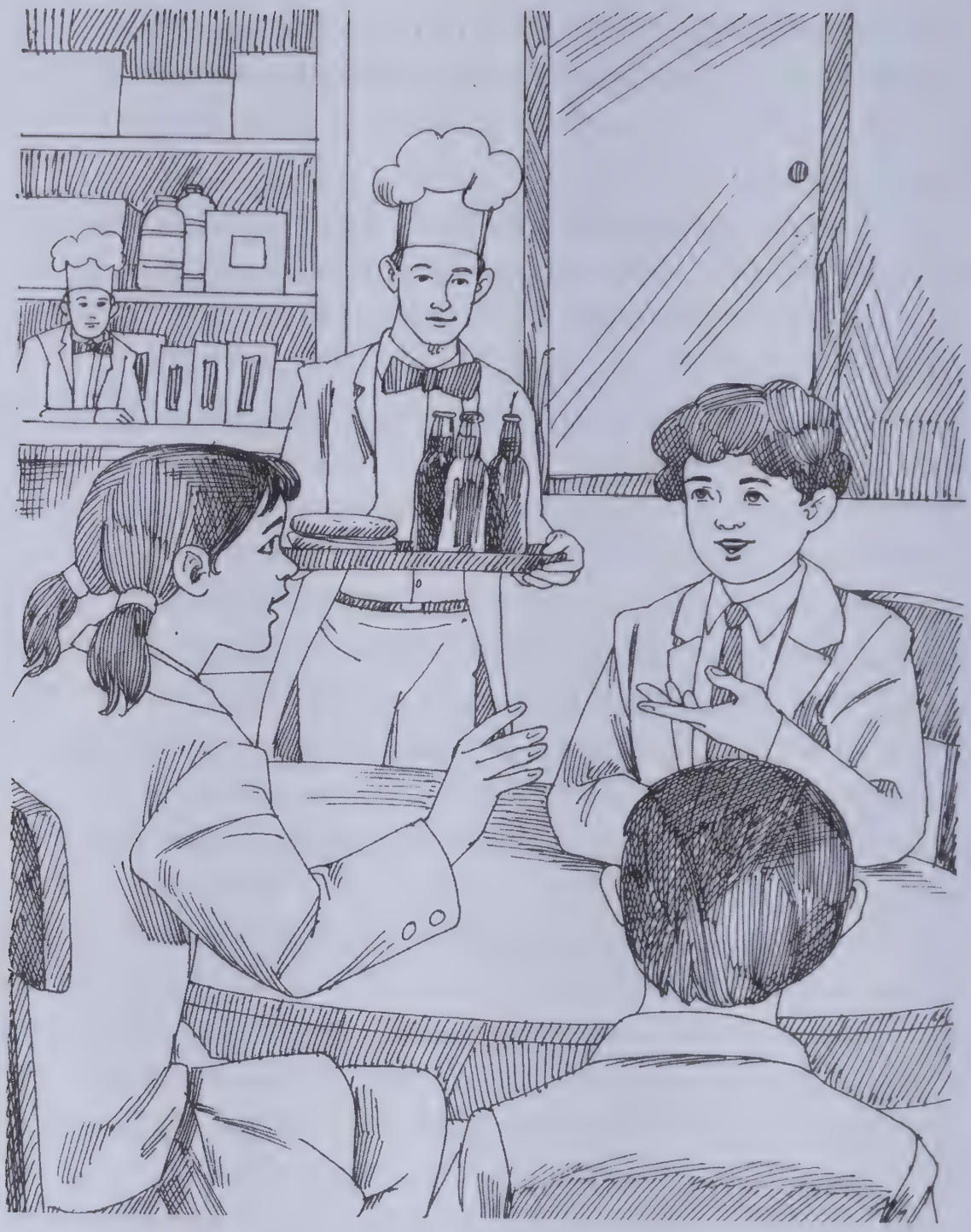
"That is precisely what I mean," said Yuvraj, supporting her point of view.

"Just imagine. We succeeded in making two of the dwarfs meet, one by one. Luckily, two of the brothers have been found at your place, now. That makes four of them. I am certain that we shall come across the rest if we make a joint effort to search for them," concluded Ruksana.

"That is fine! But how pleased are my Paanchu and Saatu going to be when I inform them that we have found two of their brothers," enthused Yuvraj.

Right then, the waiter arrived with the cold drinks and piping hot patties.

"Well, you must tell me who else stays at your farm-house. Do the others know about Paanchu and Saatu?"asked Ruksana.



"Aapa. Mummy and Papa have gone to visit my *Mausi* in Canada for three months. There is the gardener and Kisnoo who attends to my needs, at the farm. In addition, we have two dogs," Yuvraj said explicitly.

"What did you say? You have two dogs, as well. So don't both the pets pester Paanchu and Saatu?" asked Ruksana in concern.

"Not at all! Because I have made the dogs befriend Paanchu and Saatu. Right in the beginning, I had both of them feed the dogs with cake and biscuits. Soon after, I lovingly took the brothers close to the two dogs. Initially Paanchu and Saatu were petrified but gradually they became the best of friends with the dogs. They even play with each other, as of now," said Yuvraj, describing the scene.

"But when they sneaked into your house at night, didn't your dogs growl at them?" asked Ruksana.

"At that particular instance, they had created an uproar by barking constantly," Yuvraj rambled on. Actually I tie the dogs outside in the verandah, when night falls. As soon as both the brothers sneaked in at night through a gap in the gate and reached the entrance door the dogs could sense their presence and they began to bark on top of their voices. Disturbed, I woke up from my sleep, and scolding them from inside, asked them to shut up. But they refused to be quietened, under any circumstances! I got up finally and opened the door. After switching on the light outside, I saw the two dwarf brothers standing in a corner and clinging to each other, in fear."

"And then what?" asked Ruksana curiously.

"In the beginning I just couldn't figure out as to who were these tiny beings. That is when one of them revealed, 'We are small children who have been struck by a disaster and want to take shelter here'," said Yuvraj, detailing the incident.

"I moved forward and picked up Paanchu and Saatu. After striving to silence the dogs, I got them both inside. Bewildered, I asked them, 'Who are both of you and how did you manage to reach here?'" went on Yuvraj.

"That is when they narrated the ordeal they had gone through. Both of them promised, 'We will devotedly do all your tasks, whatever is possible by the two of us'." Yuvraj added.

"Now, I have got it! They must have spoken the same old dialogue," Ruksana figured out.

"You mean to say that all of them talk of the same pledge?" asked an amazed Yuvraj.

"Yes, this very assurance! Well, do Kisnoo and the gardener know about the two of them?" Ruksana wanted to make sure.

"Yes of course! Even they are friends with Paanchu and Saatu. But I have made them take an oath not to tell anyone of the dwarfs' presence. Now everyone merrily roams around the place, within the boundary of my house. And I must add that they have made all the rats infesting my farm, take flight," said a pleased Yuvraj.

Hearing his comment, everyone smiled.

"Then, you must tell me, where and how we should make the four dwarfs meet," asked an impatient Ruksana.

"Aapa! There is nobody else in my house. Why don't all of you come for a picnic to my place, on Sunday! All four of them will get to catch up with each other, on this pretext," Yuvraj made an instant plan.

"Sunday is very far off but anyway it is fine ! I will reveal this course of action to all three of them, Reema, Radha and Sukanya," said Ruksana.

"Who are these girls?" asked a confused Yuvraj.

"Bhai! The threesome are friends of the dwarf brothers. One fine day, a dwarf had sneaked into Reema's house. Anyway, you are going to meet the entire gang," Ruksana ended the conversation.

"So, shall we make a move?" asked Yuvraj.

"Yes, of course! Let's go," Ruksana said, taking leave.

* * *

When Reema, Radha and Sukanya got the news that two more brothers of Eku and Teeku had been found, the trio impatiently waited for Sunday to arrive.

Reema, Radha and Sukanya reached Ruksana's house sharp at ten o' clock in the morning, on Sunday. Thereafter telling Ammi they were going for a picnic and taking Shamim along, all of them headed for Yuvraj's farm-house. Reema had put Teeku in her pocket and Ruksana had safely stashed Eku in her outer pocket.

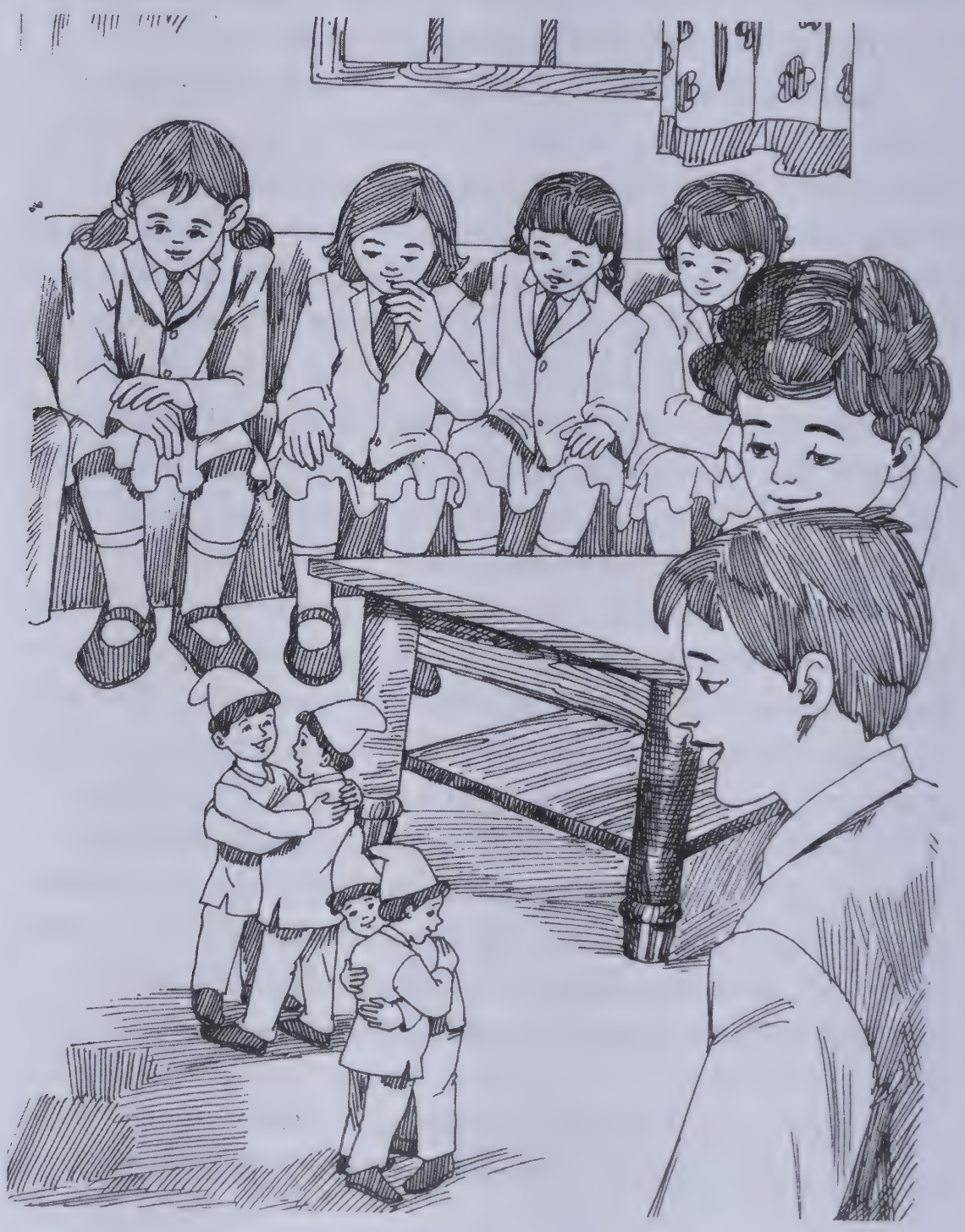
All of them reached Yuvraj's farm-house by eleven o' clock. At this end, Yuvraj was eagerly waiting for all of them. He had told Kisnoo in advance that his friends would be coming for a picnic on Sunday and he should cook some good dishes for lunch.

Ruksana introduced Radha, Reema and Sukanya to Yuvraj, on reaching the place. Soon after, the gang walked into the drawing room. Reema and Ruksana took out Teeku and Eku from their individual pockets and gently put them down on the carpet. Standing next to each other, the duo looked around, totally bewildered. Actually they had been told that they were to go for a picnic somewhere and had no inkling that they were about to meet two of their brothers. The entire gang of Reema, Radha, Sukanya and Ruksana wanted to give them a surprise.

Paanchu and Saatu stepped out of the adjacent room and came to the drawing room. Initially both the teams

looked at each other in utter confusion. Then, all four of them screamed in joy and hugged each other, in quick succession. Their throats had become constricted with absolute delight.

Thereafter Reema enthused, "Union of the brothers!"



"*Zindabad* (long live the brothers)!" everyone said simultaneously.

"Thirteen brothers!" exulted the group of friends.

"Will be united, for certain," shouted the dwarfs along with the others.

Everyone was pleased with the union of these four brothers. Shamim commented, "Yaar! The play of nature is unique because all four of them look identical."

"Truly, it is a miracle!" agreed Ruksana.

Soon after, the gang began talking about these dwarfs. While the four brothers began narrating their personal experiences to each other and began guessing where their other brothers could possibly be. Meanwhile Yuvraj's two dogs calmly walked in, at that particular time. Teeku and Eku shrieked in fear, on seeing them.

Yuvraj walked up and fondled the two hounds. He pacified Teeku and Eku, "These two are friends with Paanchu and Saatu. I will even help you to make friends with them." He went on to give some cake pieces to Eku and Teeku and asked them to feed the dogs.

Yuvraj picked up both the dwarfs separately in each hand and made them offer cake to the dogs. Relishing the cake, the dogs fondly licked the faces of Teeku plus Eku.

"Ugh! Ugh!" exclaimed Eku and Teeku in disgust.

Everyone had a hearty laugh. All the dwarf brothers managed to befriend the dogs, by this act.

Soon after, all of them came out, whereas the dwarf brothers played amongst themselves. Even the dogs would take part in their sports, at times. Everyone admired Yuvraj's beautiful garden and beds of green vegetables.

"Wow! Your gardener has truly kept a neatly manicured lawn. There is not a trace of wild grass and the saplings are so very healthy!" His friends raved.

"Our gardener is a bit lazy but Paanchu and Saatu, the two brothers, are very hardworking. They are the ones who have dug up and weeded out all the wild grass. And slogged to make the rats also take flight," said Yuvraj, praising the brothers staying with him.

At that very time, Kisnoo called out, "The food is ready!"

Everyone gathered around the dining table which was quite huge. On one side, food had been served in small plates for the four dwarf brothers, and they were made to comfortably sit on the table itself.

"Kisnoo makes such excellent food! We have truly enjoyed the feast!" Shamim applauded the cook's spread.

"Saheb, leave some space for the *gajar ka halwa*. I have made so much of it and it is Yuvraj Saheb's favourite dish," coaxed Kisnoo, so very pleased.

"There is certainly a separate section in the stomach for a sweet-dish," Shamim replied wittily.

"Go and get us another helping of the dry vegetable dish," ordered Ruksana.

Everyone relished the sumptuous meal and later enjoyed the gajar ka halwa. Soon after, Yuvraj broke a big chocolate into pieces and offered them to all those who were present. The dwarf brothers got small bits of the chocolate, as well.

"Wow! We had a grand feast today," exclaimed one of the dwarf brothers.

"The spread had to be splendid because we four brothers have got together," another joyously remarked.

Thereafter, the dwarf brothers went outdoors whereas these people sat in the drawing-room. They advised and consulted each other as to how they should go about finding the other brothers.

Sukanya suggested, "We should give an ambiguous ad in the newspaper so that only the person who has one of the dwarf brothers can understand its true meaning."

"Just listen to her crazy suggestion. The lovable dwarfs have been safe as long as they stayed with children. And how can kids like us see the ad, since we rarely read the newspaper. Who amongst us goes through the daily news?" Reema asked pointedly.

"I read the paper," responded Shamim. "But just the sports page."

"In that case, giving an ad is going to be pointless," Yuvraj opined.

"You are absolutely right," Shamim agreed. "Then what should we do?"

"I feel we should take the dogs to that particular site where the dwarfs had met with an accident. I say brother! As Paanchu had disclosed these tiny beings tumbled down from the spot where the canal's bridge spans the road. The dogs must be taken there and shown the doors of houses located in that neighbourhood. Probably the dogs can sniff the body smell of other dwarfs and we can get to know of more dwarfs, by this exercise," said Yuvraj, detailing the plan of action.

"Yes, certainly! Adopting this course is correct. Yuvraj and I will venture to that bridge tomorrow itself, to look for the dwarf brothers," Shamim offered.

"And who is going to attend school?" Ruksana asked like a typical elder sister.

"Aapa, we are going to absent ourselves from school, tomorrow. At home, we will pretend that we are going to attend school but I will come to Yuvraj's house instead. Please let us bunk school for a day!" Shamim begged.

"Okay, it is fine!" said Ruksana, giving in to his request. "You are taking a day off, for a good cause. I

hope, the two of you won't be rollicking around to have a good time?"

"No, not at all! I swear by you, Aapa," Shamim promised.

"In that case, I am not disclosing a thing to Ammi," assured Ruksana.

"So, it is decided, that both of us will be going for our next mission, tomorrow. What do you say, Yuvraj!" said Shamim, confirming the plan.

"Certainly!" Yuvraj instantly replied.

"Well! Where is it safe for the dwarfs to stay, for the time being?" Reema interrupted.

"They are fine, the way they are positioned at present. We will resolve what happens in the future, later on," said Yuvraj .

"Bhai! I will take Teeku home precisely on the day my Bua leaves," Reema asserted.

"Let's make a move. Teeku is going along with me, right now," said Ruksana, taking leave.

"Look! It is no problem if the four of them stay at my place. The rest is up to all of you," Yuvraj was helpful.

"No! It is final. Teeku and Eku are definitely going to accompany me," Ruksana affirmed.

Ruksana and Shamim picked up Teeku and Eku. Soon after, the entire gang returned to their respective homes.

* * *

Around ten thirty the next day, Shamim reached Yuvraj's house and both of them got ready to leave. Packing some foodstuff plus water and taking the dogs along, they headed towards the canal's small bridge.

On reaching that site, the slope below the bridge was closely inspected. And a rough estimate was made of that particular spot from where the dwarf brothers would had drifted away. Soon after, the two friends took the dogs, and left for the suburb located nearby.

Rows of palatial houses flanked both sides of the small road. And lush green lawns or gardens lay in front of the residences, having huge gates. Yuvraj and Shamim took the dogs close to the bungalows' gates and observed their actions. The dogs showed no particular reaction outside any of the bungalows. But at times, the dogs staying in the huge houses would bark from within and Yuvraj's dogs would answer from outside.

Both Shamim and Yuvraj were about to give up hope. At that point of time, both of them sat beneath a tree and ate the packed lunch they had got along, drank some water and fed the dogs, as well. The dogs were unleashed for a while and the two friends lay down on the grass. Both the dogs kept sniffing around the place. In a short while, the duo got up and walked towards the other side of the road, with the dogs. There were only four to five bungalows on that side.

"Well, let us also try our luck at this end," mused, Yuvraj.

That is exactly when both the dogs stopped at the gate of one bungalow and began barking. The gate had been locked from inside and they could hear no sound of any other dog barking within the house. Yuvraj managed to pacify the dogs and both the friends looked at each, wondering what to do next.

At that very moment, Shamim rang the bell. An old *sahib* stepped out, after a short while.

"Oh, who is it? And whose dogs are these?" he seemed disturbed. "Even in the daytime . . . these intruders do not let us doze off, a bit."

"Its us!" Yuvraj replied.

"What does us mean?" the elderly gentleman was irritable by now.

"Uncle! We have been looking for Dr Khare's bungalow," Yuvraj was prompt in replying.

They had read the name plate of Dr Khare outside one of the bungalows, earlier.

"Can you let us know where he stays?" Yuvraj asked.

"Oh dear! Dr Khare stays on the other side. How did you manage to land here!" the gentleman was puzzled.

"Well, we are thirsty as well and need to drink some water. Can we come in?" asked Shamim.

"Both of you can walk in but the dogs will certainly need to be tied outside," the gentleman said firmly.

"That's fine, Uncle! " Shamim agreed.

When Yuvraj had tied both the dogs outside, the gate opened and both the friends stepped in.

"Come! Do come in. You needed some water to drink, isn't it?" the old man asked warmly.

"Yes, of course Uncle! We have to fill this water bottle," explained the two friends.

"It's okay, bring it," the gentleman responded.

Shamim and Yuvraj sat in the drawing-room while Uncle filled the bottle from the kitchen and got it.

"Uncle, we will have some water, too!" Shamim requested.

Right then, a voice came from the bedroom, "Who is it?" Saying so, an old lady walked out and Yuvraj plus Shamim stood up respectfully.

"Oh! Do sit down, sons!" she coaxed lovingly.

"Aunty! Do just the two of you live in such a palatial house?" asked Yuvraj in wonder.

At this juncture, Uncle walked in with two glasses full of water. Shamim and Yuvraj helped themselves to the glasses.

"Yes, dear! Only the two of us. Our son is settled abroad and daughter is married, and living in Mumbai. Just my old husband stays here along with his old wife, that is me. Our son sends us an allowance every month. In fact, my husband gets pension, too. There is no dearth of money but it is the loneliness which hurts," Aunty rambled on.

"Who cooks the food, in that case?" Shamim asked.

"A girl comes in the morning for two to three hours. She does a bit of cleaning and then cooks meals for the afternoon and night," Aunty replied.

"But your garden is so neatly manicured! Do you have a gardener, as well?" Yuvraj asked cleverly.

"No, it's not that we have a gardener. My husband is fond of gardening and is busy sprucing up the lawns," the old lady answered.

"But your garden is so lush and green! There is no sign of any wild grass or weeds!" Yuvraj exclaimed.

"Yes, of course, he weeds out the wild grass," the old lady explained.

That is exactly when Shamim got up and admiring the old family portraits, headed towards the bedroom.

Yuvraj kept the old man and his wife engaged in light conversation. Whereas Shamim ran his eyes all over the bedroom but could not see a thing, in the beginning. Soon after, he opened an almirah of the bedroom, all of a sudden. On peeping in, he saw two dwarf brothers crouching down, in the cupboard's lower compartment.

Screaming, he called out to Yuvraj, "Come here fast. Just have a look in this cupboard."

Both the old Uncle and Aunt trailed in, behind Yuvraj.

The instant Yuvraj saw the lovable dwarfs he disclosed, "Uncle! Truly speaking, both of us ventured here in search of these dwarfs. Four of their brothers happen to be staying with us."

"Okay! But these two are so good. We are not allowing you to take them. They are very much like our own children," the old man became emotional.

"Certainly not, Uncle! We are not going anywhere with them unless you and these brothers, are agreeable," assured Yuvraj.

"We could easily figure out on seeing your immaculate garden that these brothers would have worked on its upkeep," Shamim said.

"I say, son! The two of them devotedly attend to our needs and keep the entire house in order. At times, they even massage mine and my husband's head. Both of them really take care of us and thus the vacuum of our children's absence does not hurt. We have kept the two hidden and not told a soul about their existence because that is exactly what they wanted," Aunty went about giving the details.

"Uncle! We haven't told anyone about the dwarf brothers staying with us, either. Yuvraj and I merely want that all of them should be happy, and a re-union of the entire lot," Shamim clarified.

"That is fine, son! It is a very noble act. But we just don't feel like leaving them," Aunty said tearily.

"It's final, then. We get all the brothers to your house but you will have to adopt the entire gang," Shamim passed a witty remark.

"Yes, of course! We shall adopt them," Aunty confirmed.

"Aunty, you must think over the matter! You

will have to give a share of your property, in case that happens!" Shamim said amusedly. Hearing this, everyone had a hearty laugh. Whereas Aunty became a bit serious, soon after.

"Oh come on Aunty! I was just joking," Shamim said, making her feel at ease.

"So Uncle! If you give the permission, shall we take them to meet their brothers? We will drop them back after a couple of days. And yes, what are their individual names?" Yuvraj asked politely.

"Their names are Dou and Charu. Our hearts do not want to part from them, even for a day! What say, Dou and Charu! Would you like to go with them?" Uncle wanted to know their point of view.

"No *Dadu*! The two of us just want to serve and stay with both of you. But we would certainly love to meet our brothers, as well. Oh! They were such lovely days when we dwarfs would live together as a team at Gauri Ma's house. Even though we ate plain and simple food, there was such joy in their love and our staying together under one roof," said Dou, remembering the good old times.

"In that case, son! Go ahead with them, for a couple of days. I am sure both of you will definitely come back to meet your Dadu and *Dadi*. Kamla, what do you have to say?" Uncle asked.

Dadi Kamla was teary-eyed, "Hey! Are we going to focus on our comfort or will we every think of these children's prospects? You very well know how delightful it is to catch up with one's close ones. Just let them go."

"Son, it is decided! Take them along," said Uncle, giving in.

Dou and Charu moved ahead to touch Dadi-Dada's feet. Seeing their respectful gesture, Shamim and Yuvraj also bent to touch the old couple's feet. Soon after, safely putting a brother each in their respective pockets, the boys took leave.

* * *

Stepping out, Yuvraj and Shamim untied the dogs and everyone headed back home. Stopping on the way, they sat down to rest for a while in some secluded place. The dogs were tied a bit further down. Soon enough, Yuvraj and Shamim took out both the lovable dwarfs from their pockets and put them on the ground.

"How did you people manage to reach there?" Shamim asked.

Charu gave a detailed reply, "I drifted down the canal for quite some distance and was washed ashore on the other side. With great effort I climbed up the canal's slope and came out. Thereafter, I called out to the other brothers assuming that if there was one of them nearby, he would head there. A little later, Dou walked towards me, as he shouted out for the others. When the two of us got to meet each other, we were a bit relieved. Soon after, we frantically searched around for the others by calling out to them for a while but we could not trace any of them. Dou and me spotted a street light somewhat further down and the two of us walked in that direction."

"And then what?" Shamim asked, eager to know the truth.

"There were rows of palatial houses and we went about inspecting the gates of a couple of bungalows.

Thereupon, we burrowed our way beneath the gate of a house, and sneaked in. A dog ferociously barked from within on hearing the faint sound of our footsteps. We thought that it was not safe to stay on and came out of the premises. Then we entered one of the bungalows on the other side and began scrutinising the place. There

was an outhouse located at the back of that house where three to four young children were fast asleep with their parents. Most probably the parents would be working in that bungalow. We discussed amongst ourselves that it would not be correct to hang on there, as well. How long could we possibly hide ourselves from so many children of servants serving in that sprawling house, and live there. We stepped out of a house, yet again.

"That was a very sensible course of action, on your part! And then what?" Shamim asked.

"Then after passing two to three houses, we entered Dadi-Dada's bungalow which stood down the lane. The outhouse was empty and we spent the night there itself. In the morning we saw two elders, Dada and Dadi, sitting in the verandah and having their tea.

"It seemed we had come to the perfect hideout," Dou remarked

"That is when I called out to Dadu who looked around in wonder. He asked Dadi if she had also heard a rather feeble voice."

At that point of time, Dou piped in, "We are down here."

"When the elderly couple looked down they were stupefied and could not utter a word."

I explained to him, "Dadu! A disaster has struck the two of us. Drifting down a canal, we were washed ashore. Lost we wandered around and landed here. Kindly ensure our safety and allow us to stay with you. We will devotedly take over your tasks which are feasible and within our reach."

That is when Aunty warmly welcomed them, "Come, here! Come close to me!"

When the two of us moved a bit towards her, she picked us up, "Oh! They are such tiny children! All their features are very much like small children and they speak so sweetly! The two of them are definitely going to stay with us. Why? What do you have to say?"

"Yes, of course! That will keep both of us happily busy," said Dadu, readily agreed to the proposal.

Precisely then, Dou insisted, "Dadu! You will have to keep the two of us in hiding at your place. If other people get to know about our presence, there will be crowds thronging here. And one never knows what might happen in that case."

"Yes! Both of them are absolutely correct in their demand," Dadi said. "No son! The two of you are certainly going to stay with us. And we are not going to tell a word about you to anyone, but even you have to be particular about living in secrecy. Well! what is your diet?"

"Exactly the same as what both of you eat?" Dou anwered.

"That means, you will have tea and rusk," Dadi confirmed.

"Why not Dadi! The two of us are virtually starving," Charu replied instantly.

Dadu went in and probably wondered what utensils he should bring along. Finally he got two bottle covers. We were served tea in them and small bits of rusk were also given to us.

Charu and I sipped the tea and ate rusk soaked in it. Soon after, Charu asked for some more and Dadi poured out the beverage. Dadu and Dadi forgot about their own tea and were busy watching us slurp the hot tea and rusk.

"And then what happened?" Yuvraj asked.

Thereafter, Dadu inquired about our entire story. I narrated all that we had gone through, right from Bholu Dada and Gauri Ma's place till now.

Dadi was truly moved on hearing our harrowing tale, "Oh! I wonder where their other brothers would be! May God keep them safe and sound."

Then she went on to ask our names and we both told her our individual names. Soon after, she took us inside and created a special corner for us to stay in the bedroom's almirah. Showing us the bathroom, she filled a flat metal plate with water thus arranging for us to bathe and wash up. We ended up staying with them, in this manner."

"It was good that you people decided to stay on there," remarked Shamim.

* * *

Thereafter, Yuvraj, Shamim, Dou and Charu headed towards Yuvraj's house. The foursome reached his house, by the time it was evening. Shamim handed over the dwarf he was carrying in his pocket to Yuvraj and taking leave from outside, walked homewards.

Yuvraj stepped into his house and called out for Panchu and Satu, "Okay, guess! What have I got for you?"

"*Burfi*!"Panchu said excitedly.

"No! It's chocolate," Satu enthused.

"No dear! It is something more delicious and sweeter than these two delicacies. Let's see if you can guess!" coaxed Yuvraj.

Panchu and Satu began to think seriously. At that

point of time, Dou and Charu tried to jump up in quick succession, to catch a glimpse of their brothers.

Panchu's gaze fell on the coat's pocket, "Oh, I see! Our brothers have arrived."

"Yes! Well done!" Yuvraj applauded. Taking out Dou and Charu from his pocket, he made them stand on the carpet.

All the brothers put their arms around each other. Dancing merrily, they sang,

"Uncle Yuvraj is so great and good!

We love him from our hearts, as we should."

The four of them sang and pranced about for a long time. Yuvraj was also pleased to seem them so happy.

* * *

On reaching home, when Shamim narrated the entire incident to Ruksana she said, "Look, do not tell Eku and Teeku yet that two more of their brothers have reached Yuvraj's place, otherwise they won't be able to sleep for the whole night. We want to give them a surprise, in any case."

Soon after, Ruksana told the story of these two brothers of Eku and Teeku being found to Reema, Radha and Sukanya on telephone.

Their enthusiasm knew no bounds! They chalked out a programme of taking Eku and Teeku to Yuvraj's house, the very next day.

"They will be so delighted to meet Dou and Charu, their newly found brothers. Then after getting all of them to meet each other, we will have to send Dou and Charu back to the old Uncle and Aunty, as promised," said Ruksana .

"Naturally!" Reema answered.

Thereafter, they casually talked about matters in general.

* * *

The next day, the whole team of Reema, Radha, Sukanya, Ruksana and Shamim reached Yuvraj's farm-house.

Yuvraj had already sent the four brothers, Panchu, Satu, Dou and Charu, to another room.

Ruksana took out Eku and Teeku from her coat's pocket and said cheerfully, "Well, both of you must close your eyes. A miracle is going to be shown to the two of you."

Both of them shut their eyes. At that very moment, Yuvraj gave an indication, and the four brothers stepped out and came there.

"Come on, open your eyes," Ruksana urged.

"Oh that's wonderful! Dou and Charu have been found, as well!" Teeku exclaimed joyously.

Both Eku and Teeku hugged Dou and Charu. Soon enough, everyone began dancing merrily to celebrate their union. A little later the brothers sat down exhausted.

Panchu and Satu volunteered, "Okay, the two of us are going to sing a song composed by us, for all of you."

"Yes, of course! Go on," the friends coaxed them to continue.

"Sukanya Didi, Radha Didi,
Great Didi Reema.
We love them all so much
That it has no bounds, as such."

Everyone clapped, "Wow! That was splendid, dears! What an excellent song you have created."

Ruksana seemed hurt at that point of time, "Oh, I see! Radha, Reema and Sukanya are all marvellous. It is Ruksana Didi who is worthless! Isn't it?"

"No! Not at all! We have written a song on Didi Ruksana, as well," Panchu clarified. Just listen to what you have to do, Didi —

"How good, so very lovable,

Is our Aapa Ruksana.
All of us jointly sing a song,
Following our Aapa Ruksana."

"Oh that was great! Ruksana Aapa you must sing a song now and all of us shall follow suit," everyone present was insistent.

Yuvraj retorted, instantly, "It is fine dears! All the didis and Aapa are great. Whereas we have no bond with you all."

"Dada," said Satu, "In that case, you must listen to your song, as well—

"Yuvi Dada, is so great,
Grand is Shamim Bhai.
Both must make everyone eat today
Some fantastic *mithai*."

"Oh, that's splendid! These small beings have performed wonderfully today," said an elated Yuvraj. Ruksana Aapa has to sing a song first and then Shamim and Yuvraj must serve mithai to everyone."

"They have to feed us with mithai, they will, they will!" everyone screamed joyously, except Shamim and Yuvraj.

"Ruksana Aapa must sing, she has to, she has to!" shouted Yuvraj and Shamim, soon after.

"Okay, its done!" said Ruksana. "Come on, children, I am going to sing a song. And everyone must follow me. Well, let me think of the composition I have to sing. Yes it goes like this—

"Look at everyone marching ahead, ram pam-pam,
Dears! You must sing such songs.
Joys and sorrows come and go, tara ram pam-pam
Laugh and make others laugh, with these songs."

Everyone repeated Aapa's lines. And then such

a mood of melodies was created that everyone kept singing for quite some time.

After the musical session, Ruksana piped in, "Dear! Uncle Yuvraj is going to serve us chocolates and not mithai."

"Yes, that would be fine!" Yuvraj instantly agreed." I am always well stocked with chocolates."

Soon after, Yuvraj got a box of chocolates from his bedroom and gave a bar each to everyone. The lovable dwarfs were also given small bits of the delicious goodies. Right then, Kisnoo arrived with piping hot *pakoras* for the gang. Everyone relished the pakoras along with green chutney and chatted away to glory.

At the other end, the dwarf brothers went to another room and narrated the joys and sorrows they had gone through.

A little later, the dwarf brothers began a game of hide and seek. While playing they came and hid at different spots in that room where all the friends were sitting.

Everyone in the gang kept looking at their game and talking simultaneously. Just then, Teeku and Eku had a slight tiff with each other.

"You cheat all the time and were busy focusing at where I was going to hide," Teeku accused Eku.

"No, I was not spying, and spotted you just like that," Eku clarified.

"Get lost! You are a liar," Teeku answered back.

"You are a liar," Eku was furious and added, "Your Didi lies."

"How dare you call my Didi a liar," retorted Teeku, in rage.

The two were at loggerheads over the dispute.

"Oh, gosh! What is going on? We had thought that you brothers lovingly play with each other, but it seems you noisily quarrel, as well," Ruksana intervened.

"Didi, that is not the case! He may accuse me of anything but why did he point a finger at my Didi," Teeku fumed.

"Why did you dare to demean my Didi," Eku retaliated.

"Okay, it is fine! Both of you are good children and ought to say sorry to each other," Radha tried to pacify them.

"I am not going to be the first one to apologise. It is his fault," answered an exasperated Eku.

Teeku gave in, "Okay, I am sorry."

"You must apologise to him, now," urged Radha.

"Sorry!" said Eku.

"All you children are very good, that is for sure. We have come to know today that you people fight as well," Ruksana commented.

All those present had a hearty laugh.

"Well, go and play outdoors now. Let us discuss some important matters," Radha said firmly.

Yuvraj opined, "We have almost scrutinised all the houses near the canal. I strongly feel that apart from Dou and Charu there is no other dwarf brother there."

"In that case, how should we go about finding the other brothers?" asked a puzzled Shamim.

"Probably those beings flowed far down the canal, from the site of the accident," suggested Yuvraj.

"Yes, it is certainly possible," Shamim agreed.

"In that case, let us search for the lovable dwarfs by walking along the canal's banks along with the dogs, tomorrow. We may come across them, a bit further down," Yuvraj proposed.

"But the jungle lies ahead," Shamim revealed.

"Yes, of course! I am aware of this fact but it is possible that the lovable dwarfs can drift and land at that distant location. They could have been trapped in the jungle? We must go there at least once and thoroughly search for them." Yuvraj contemplated.

"Okay, then it is finalised. I will come back tomorrow, again," Shamim responded.

* * *

The very next day, Shamim reached Yuvraj's house at ten in the morning. Thereafter, both of them packed some eatables and drinks to carry along. They took the dogs and walked on the mud path in the direction of the water flow, along the canal's banks. Sniffing here and there, the dogs also tread along by their side. Even after trudging for roughly two hours, they could not find a clue of any dwarf brother.

Shamim was highly disappointed, "No, brother! Those people can not be flung so far away after drifting in the water. We ought to be going back."

"Dear friend! The current of the canal's water is fast. Why can't these small beings flow so far ahead? Come, let us have a look further down, for another fifteen-twenty minutes," Yuvraj sounded optimistic.

"Fine, we will go on but let us laze around for a while," Shamim said tired by now.

Both of them sat down on a huge rafter which had fallen down on the shore of the canal. They feasted on some light snacks and even the dogs were served water.

"Come, let us make a move!" urged Yuvraj.

Soon after, the duo walked ahead. They had barely taken ten steps when a snake slithered past, in front of them. Both of them were taken aback and stood standstill.

"No, brother! The jungle is getting dense and we ought to head back," said Shamim, in fear.

"You are amazing, my friend! Getting scared by a mere snake sliding past," Yuvraj tried to boost him up.

Thereafter, the duo moved ahead. Walking for about ten minutes, they spotted a railway line. As soon as they reached the bridge crossing the railway track, the dogs began sniffing something in the sand.

Right then, Shamim exclaimed, "Yuvraj, just have a look! There are marks of small footsteps on the sand. Observe them minutely, with care."

Both of them bent down and inspected the footprints, "Yes, of course! These marks seem to belong to the dwarfs' feet," Yuvraj said with certainty.

"In that case, they must be here, somewhere nearby," Shamim sounded excited.

Even the dogs sniffed the footsteps and tried to walk ahead in a particular direction.

Yuvraj and Shamim trailed behind the dogs, a bit away from the railway track. Deep inside the jungle, the dogs stopped near a hollow thick tree and began barking on that very side.

"Brother! The dwarfs ought to be somewhere here, closeby. Just peep into the hollow of the tree," Shamim coaxed.

Soon after, Yuvraj looked into the hollow but could not see a thing. But he definitely chanced upon a bread wrapper, "There is not a soul here but where did this bread wrapper come from?"

"Move aside. I will take a look," Shamim also peered into the hollow. It was absolutely dark in the upper portion of the hollow. Not a thing was visible but amazingly the dogs continued to bark in that direction.

"In case you have a torch, we can switch it on and look into the hollow of this tree," Shamim suggested.

"Well, why would I carry a torch in the daytime. However looking at the bread wrapper it appears that the dwarf brothers would be hiding in the upper part of this hollow tree," Yuvraj opined.

Soon after, Yuvraj called out, "Look, lovable dwarfs! We are your friends and want you to re-unite with your brothers. That is the reason why we have come so far, searching for you."

No voice answered him back. Then, Shamim rambled on, "We very well know that you are thirteen brothers in all and used to earlier work at the house of a farmer. Your brothers staying at our house, are the ones who have given us this information."

That is when a somewhat feeble voice could be heard from the hollow, "Okay, we will climb down but from where have these dogs arrived. We are really scared of dogs and you must first of all take them away."

"All right," Yuvraj assured them.

He took the dogs and tied them to a tree at some distance. After a short while, two dwarf brothers stepped out in a miserable condition. Their eyes were dazzled by the strong glare of the sun. Instantly they shaded their eyes with their tiny hands.

A little later when their eyes were fine, one of them asked in a puzzled tone, "Who are you people? How is it that you have come searching for us?"

Yuvraj consoled them, "Both of us are your friends and that is precisely the reason why we have trudged so far, looking for you in the jungle. Your brothers are safely staying at our houses and you need not be afraid of us."

Instantly Shamim took out biscuits from the foodstuff he was carrying along. The dwarfs broke them into small bits and began eating them.

Soon after, Shamim lovingly asked them, "Will you drink some water?"

They nodded their heads, "Yes."

Shamim filled the bottle's lid with water and made them have it; and only then were the dwarfs somewhat reassured.

"Well! How did you two manage to live in the

jungle for so many days? What arrangements did you make for food and water? I feel about a month has passed since you met with that accident," Yuvraj said, trying to be friendly.

When they gave no reply, Shamim asked, "What are your individual names?"

"My name is Aathu and his name is Dassu," answered one of them.

"Splendid! Tell us more about yourselves," Shamim urged.

"We had given up all hope that some good samaritan like you would arrive and save us. But both of you have come like God to our rescue," Dassu sounded grateful.

"However, you haven't revealed how the two of you managed to stay alive in such a lonely jungle?" asked Shamim, curious to know the truth.

"We kept drifting away in the gushing water," Dassu went on. "Thereafter when the canal's water flow was checked a bit at the small railway bridge, the two of us were washed ashore, onto the sand. We lay lifeless at that spot, for some time. Thereafter, when the water which had flooded our stomach gushed out of our nose and mouth, we got up slowly with tremendous effort. It was pitch dark all around and we could not figure out what to do, and where to go. Soon after, we came out and sat on a dry spot. A train chugged past a little later and we were petrified with fear. Then everything was calm and peaceful all around."

"And then what?" asked Yuvraj.

"We spent a long night at that site," Aathu revealed. "When the day dawned, it struck us that we had been trapped in the jungle. Mustering courage, we somehow got up and began looking for a safe spot. Starving with hunger we had no idea what to eat? A jackal prowled by in search of food and we were speechless with fear. Thankfully he didn't see us and went on his usual course."

"And then what happened?" asked Yuvraj.

"Trudging ahead soon after, we found this huge tree which had a massive hollow stuck to the ground," Aathu detailed. We thought that it was best to make this place our living quarters. In the beginning we gathered some grass plus straw and fixed a temporary shelter but then we felt that any huge beast could come over and devour us. That is the reason we strived to climb to the upper part of the tree's hollow. Soon enough, we found the way of clambering up and both of us made our dwelling, a bit higher. Then we stepped out in search of food but what could we possibly find in the wilderness. We managed to eat some half ripe plums plucked from a plum tree but how could our hunger be appeased with such meagre intake? That is when we heard some men talking amongst themselves. They had arrived on a small rail car that runs on the railway track. Mounting on to it, workers repair the railway line. Those people stopped the car by the canal's side and we stealthily managed to reach close to them. They were five to six of them. The lot went to wash their hands and faces with the canal's water. Then they ate some of the foodstuff they had brought along, drinking the canal's water to quench their thirst. Consequently, they kept all the things next to the canal and proceeded a bit further to repair the railway line."

"Okay, and then what?" it was Shamim who asked this question.

"The two of us were on the lookout for this very chance," Dassu said. "Luckily we got a loaf of bread and a packet of salted snacks from their provisions. Initially we dragged the bread and stashed it in our hollow abode and then managed to drag along and stow the salted

packet. There were some bananas too and we were able to carry away, two of them. Soon after, we rubbed off the marks made on the ground by our dragging exercise and strew leaves on them so that those people had no idea of what was going on. In this manner, an excellent arrangement of our meals was made for the next fifteen to twenty days. In any case, water was flowing by in the canal. Often, we would venture to the canal, to bathe and quench our thirst with its waters."

"Why didn't the two of you go along with those men?" Shamim seemed puzzled.

"If we appeared in front of six men you never know how they would have treated us. We were apprehensive that if everyone came to know of us, it would be tough to keep our existence a secret. Both of us were on the look out of such friends who could hide our mysterious presence," Dassu explained.

"Well, that is fine. And then?" asked Yuvraj.

"And then what?" Aathu went on with the tale. "We managed to survive on the stolen food and by feeding on the tiny fruits plus sweet roots growing in the jungle. We were confronted by several small animals of the wilderness but we would flee and hide ourselves."

"You were never attacked by any of the beasts?" asked Yuvraj in wonder.

"Once it so happened that a wild cat spotted us. And when we ran for our lives, she hounded us with amazing speed. We were about to be pounced upon when Dassu sighted a rabbit's burrow," Aathu revealed. "Instantly he entered it whereas the cat followed him right up to the very end. This gave me a chance too and I barged into a tunnel on the other side. Most probably it was another opening of the same burrow. For some time,

the cat lurked at the tunnel's entrance and then walked way in utter disappointment. The two of us heaved a sigh of relief at our narrow escape."

"Both of you turned out to be really smart," Shamim applauded.

"Invariably, one learns to be clever in the wild jungle," said Aathu, humbly. "Rats would often pester us in exactly the same fashion and infest our abode to feast on the stored eatables. Right in the beginning, a fat rat arrived and we could only make him flee with great effort. Then the two of us sculpted a couple of weapons from a thorny bush, and they are still stashed inside. We continued to make the rats run for their lives with those very tools to defend ourselves."

"Yes! In fact, he had hurt the eye of one of the rats," said Dassu proudly pointing at Aathu.

"Excellent! The two of you are really brave! Didn't both of you come across anyone else?" asked Shamim, curiously.

"Recently a didi and bhaiya had come on a motorcycle, about five to six days back," Dassu disclosed. Those people must have kept sitting near the small bridge but by the time we came to know of their arrival, the duo were ready to go back. We ran towards them and even called out to both of them. However they were so engrossed in their talk that they failed to hear our cry, and left abruptly. Luckily we came across a half-eaten packet of chips discarded by them and we have been surviving on it for the past few days."

"Well, that's why we came across a bread wrapper and an empty packet of chips at your hideout! The two of you managed to finish off the entire loaf of bread!" said an amazed Yuvraj.

"What else could we do?" replied Dassu, matter of factly.

"Okay, then let's make a move," suggested Yuvraj.

"Yes, of course! Let's go," responded Aathu and Dassu.

Shamim and Yuvraj safely placed the dwarfs in their coat pockets, and headed back along with the dogs. Reaching home in the evening, Yuvraj made all the brothers meet Aathu and Dassu. Everyone was pained to see their dishevelled condition, dirty-filthy clothes and pitiable state but all of them were delighted to meet each other. Each of the brothers hugged the duo, in quick succession. Soon after, they began narrating their personal experiences to one another. Shamim rang up and informed his gang of friends about two more of the lovable dwarfs being found. As of now, eight of the thirteen brothers had been united in this manner.

* * *

Once again, a meeting was held at Yuvraj's farm-house, the next day. The entire team sat in the drawing room and began thinking about what should be their next course of action.

That is when Sukanya opined, "It is not necessary that the dwarf brothers will be found just with children. Now, look at both of them, Dou and Charu. We chanced upon them at the residence of two old people."

"Of course, Sukanya," agreed Yuvraj. "But what is it that you are trying to convey."

"Brother! I want to give the same suggestion, again. We must give an 'ad' in the newspaper which makes only those people who have these lovable dwarfs staying with them, give a response on reading it," Ruksana persisted.

"But how is the ad going to be composed?" asked an eager Yuvraj.

Sukanya reflected over the matter and replied, "Look we must frame it somewhat like this, 'The clinic of a *Vaid* who has had thirteen years of experience. We have a reliable treatment here for those who are very dwarfish. Kindly contact, so and so …'."

"What are you specifically implying by thirteen years," asked Reema, a bit puzzled.

"I say! Those brothers are thirteen in number. A person who is intelligent enough, will certainly under stand what we are trying to convey," Ruksana explained.

"That's fine!" responded Reema, "In any case an experience of thirteen years isn't much, but it will do! So who is going to give the ad and whose telephone number is it going to carry?"

Yuvraj promptly volunteered, "I am willing to do this task. I will give an ad and get my telephone number added, as well. But how would it work, if we wrote hospital instead of clinic."

"Yes, that is going to be just perfect," Reema instantly agreed.

"So let us frame the advertisement in this fashion," said an enthusiastic Yuvraj.

"The hospital of a Vaid having thirteen years of experience.

A definite cure for those who are extremely dwarfish.

Contact at telephone no: 2514682

Timings are from five o'clock to seven o' clock in the evening."

"Well, does it sound fine?" asked Yuvraj.

"Yes, it is just perfect!" confirmed Reema.

The very next day, Yuvraj gave this ad in two local newspapers. Thereafter, he rang up Uncle and Aunty

to inform them that he was getting Dou and Charu over to their house.

"Hello Uncle! I am Yuvraj calling," he said.

"Yes, of course dear! How are Dou and Charu, our two children," Uncle inquired, from the other end.

"Uncle, both of them are overjoyed in the company of their brothers. Can we keep them over here for a few more days, if we have your permission," requested Yuvraj.

"I say! Both of us are missing them a lot but it is okay! In case they are enjoying the stay with their brothers, you can do whatever you think proper," the old man complied reluctantly.

"Uncle! They ought to certainly get some more time to stay on with their brothers," Yuvraj persisted.

"Well, it is all right. You can keep them over for another couple of days," Uncle finally agreed.

"Thanks a lot from my side and on their behalf. Respectful greetings to you and Aunty," Yuvraj concluded happily.

"Okay then. God bless!" replied Uncle, putting down the phone.

Yuvraj was thoughtful and considered this to be a great conversation.

* * *

Finally, Ruksana took Eku and Teeku to her house. The ad was consecutively published in the local newspaper on Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Yuvraj impatiently waited for the phone to ring from five to seven in the evening, on all the three days, but there was no phone call.

At five thirty in the evening on Tuesday, the telephone ultimately rang.

Some female voice inquired, "Are you speaking from 2514682?"

"Yes, of course!" Yuvraj promptly replied.

"Child! I do not want to talk to you but the Vaid ji," she clarified.

"The Vaid ji has gone out to check up some patient. You can tell me what is it you want and I will convey it to him," answered Yuvraj, cleverly.

"No, I have work with him, in particular," the caller refused to disclose the reason of her call.

"Do you want to get the treatment done for dwarfishness?" Yuvraj asked discreetly.

"Yes, of course! But the medical treatment is for someone else and not me," she clarified.

"In that case, you give me your address and telephone number. I will hand them over to Vaid ji," Yuvraj assured her.

"That is fine with me! Note down my address: 12/2 Moti Nagar, and the telephone number is: 2532525," the lady responded.

"It is okay, Aunty! I will tell Vaid ji," said Yuvraj, ending the telephonic talk.

Moti Nagar, he gave it a serious thought. Oh! Reema is the one who stays at Moti Nagar! It means, the phone must have come from some place which is in the vicinity of her house. If that is so, it is all right! This dwarf must have somehow reached there.

Soon enough, he rang up Reema, "Hello Reema!"

"Yes, Yuvraj! What is the matter?"

"Well! Isn't your house in Moti Nagar?" Yuvraj wanted to make sure.

"Yes, of course! It is in Moti Nagar," she confirmed.

"What is your house number?" Yuvraj asked Reema.

"12/8, Moti Nagar," Reema replied.

"Okay! Can you tell me who stays in 12/2?" Yuvraj asked.

"Why, what is the matter?" Reema sounded curious.

"Some lady rang up from 12/2. She was inquiring about Vaid ji for the treatment of dwarfishness," Yuvraj revealed.

"Very good! That means there has been some response to the advertisement," Reema was thrilled.

"Yes!" said Yuvraj.

"12/2, well, let me try and recall...hmm . . . yes it just struck me! Most probably Sarla Aunty lives in that house. Yes, indeed! She is the one who stays there. She has a daughter too, who lives along with her. Her father works in the merchant navy and actually remains out of station for eight months in a year," Reema gave the details.

"That is okay! I do not need their entire history. But one of the dwarf brothers must have certainly reached their place, by chance. And that is precisely the reason they rang up. How should we plan the course of action, now," Yuvraj mused.

"What can I say? Shall I go and visit their house, if you want," Reema offered to help out.

"No, you must not call on them. Shamim and I will go and meet them, in the daytime tomorrow. And then let us see what happens!" Yuvraj said firmly.

"All right, whatever you think is proper." Soon after, Reema added that her Bua had left yesterday morning and she would bring back Teeku to her house, in the evening.

"That is fine! You can have a word with Ruksana," Yuvraj suggested.

That very evening, Reema got Teeku home.

* * *

Around eleven o' clock, Yuvraj and Shamim reached Sarla Aunty's house, the next day. Yuvraj told Shamim, "You wait outside while I go in and meet Aunty."

He rang the call bell.

"Who is it?" asked a voice from inside.

"It is me! I have come from Vaid ji's house," Yuvraj promptly answered.

"Do, come in," the voice instructed.

"Oh! You seem to be his son. I had to meet the Vaid ji," the Aunty seemed disappointed.

"Certainly! But Vaid ji is the one who has sent me. Who has to be treated?" Yuvraj asked cleverly.

"The patient is not here," the Aunty explained.

"Okay! What would be his height?" asked Yuvraj.

"Must be about two feet. How much can his height increase?" she was keen to know.

"Only Vaid ji can tell this. But he treats extremely small dwarfs," Yuvraj clarifed.

"How short?" asked the Aunty, eagerly.

"Those who are about seven to eight inches tall," Yuvraj replied.

"Have you ever seen men who are seven to eight inches tall, by chance?" asked the Aunty, wanting to make sure.

"Why not? Vaid ji has cured so many of them." Yuvraj said confidently.

That is when the Aunty laughed, "Tell me the truth. Has a dwarf, say about seven to eight inches tall, accidentally walked into your house."

"Yes, he has, as a matter of chance," Yuvraj replied

"Okay! That means that Chheku's brother must be putting up, in your house. And that is exactly the reason why you gave such an ad in the newspaper," said the Aunty, relieved now.

"Yes, Aunty! You have grasped the situation, correctly," Yuvraj affirmed.

"Oh! A tiny Chheku also walked into our house, by chance. He is very dear to us, both mother and daughter. Even we were very keen to search for his brothers but could not figure out how to find them, without

informing anyone of his existence. May you prosper!" the Aunty blessed Yuvraj.

"Aunty! One of my friends is standing outside. Can I call him in, if you say so?" Yuvraj asked politely.

"Yes, of course! Why not! And why did you make him stand outside?" the Aunty warmly responded.

Yuvraj asked Shamim to come inside. And that is precisely when the Aunty called out to Chheku. A lovable dwarf who was so very small, stepped out of another room and walked in.

"Hey dear Chheku! We have got information about your brothers' whereabouts," Yuvraj and Shamim said enthusiastically.

"Yes, of course! I was listening to your conversation. But how many of my brothers are at your place?" Chheku asked eagerly.

"Well. Try and guess how many of them could be there?" quizzed Yuvraj.

"Two, probably three of them," Chheku tried to figure out.

"Wrong. There are eight brothers in all, staying with us! Would you want to meet them," asked Yuvraj chirpily.

"Why not? But of course that is possible when Mummy ji and Didi ji say so," Chheku remarked politely.

"Why shouldn't you, *beta*! Why would I ring up if I did not want you to re-unite with your brothers?" assured the Aunty.

"So, what does it mean Aunty! Can we take him along?" asked Shamim, this time round.

"I am going to send him only when his Pammi Didi comes back from school. Probably he would also not

like to leave without meeting his didi. What do you say, Chheku?" urged the Aunty.

"All right, Mummy ji!" Chheku responded.

"Well! What do you all want to drink, something cold or tea?" Aunty asked them.

"No Aunty! Nothing at the moment. Maybe some other time," Shamim refused the offer politely.

"It's not certain when you all are going to drop in next! I will get some sweet lemon water for the two of you," insisted Aunty.

"No Aunty! Why are you taking the trouble?" Yuvraj intervened.

"Dears! You all are doing so much for these tiny and meek children! With such selfless intention, you want to help them in every possible way! Under any cost you want to hide them from other people; just for this reason so that no misfortune befalls these dwarf brothers. I greatly value such noble thoughts of yours. That is why I would love doing anything for you. Even my Pammi is very fond of this lovable Chheku, in exactly the same way," said the Aunty, praising their worthy deeds.

Saying so, the Aunty went into the kitchen.

Shamim and Yuvraj were pleased to listen to such rave reviews about themselves.

Right then, Chheku spoke up, "You people haven't met Pammi Didi. Since a long time, she was worried about how to get me to re-unite with my other brothers. She is going to be thrilled on knowing about you people."

In some time, Aunty got two glasses of lemon water in a tray and assorted sweetmeats in a plate.

"Okay, come on have some sweets to celebrate the finding of so many brothers of our Chheku!" she coaxed.

Both of them helped themselves to a piece of sweetmeat and a cool glass of lemon water each. "What about you, Aunty?" they asked.

"Not me! I have a sore throat and so I won't have the cold drink. However I am certainly going to savour the sweet delicacies along with you people," she explained.

The Aunty gave a small piece of the sweetmeat to Chheku and ate the rest herself.

"Well, thanks Aunty! Allow us to take leave. The two of us will drop in tomorrow and take him. But probably Reema who lives in 12/8 will come today. Do you know her? A dwarf brother had accidentally dropped in at her house, as well. She may visit you in the night, itself," Yuvraj said.

"Yes, of course! I know Reema. She is Pammi's friend and stays closeby, just two feet away."

"Okay then, we will push off," said Shamim and Yuvraj.

Both of them headed back home.

* * *

Reema rang the call bell of Aunty's house, sharp at seven in the night. Pammi was the one who opened the door, "Come! Do come in, Reema! I was waiting for you, only."

Both of them stepped in.

"Okay, let me quickly have a glimpse of our Teeku's brother," urged Reema. Then, Reema took Teeku out from her coat's pocket and put him on the floor.

"Wow! That's wonderful! He is an exact replica of our Chheku," exclaimed Pammi. She called out, "Chheku! Just look, who has come to our house!"

Getting Chheku along, Aunty entered the drawing room at that point of time. "God's *maya* or illusory power is truly admirable! Both of them are absolute replications of each other," she enthused.

She also put Chheku on the floor. Both the brothers tightly hugged each other and their eyes brimmed with tears. Everyone was moved on seeing this touching scene. And then everything became normal, in a short while.

"Well, Reema! How do you recognize all of them and who named the dwarfs?" asked a curious Pammi.

Teeku spoke up, precisely at that point of time, "When we were at Kisan Dada's house, Gauri Ma, his wife kept our names. For identification she had embroidered marks in different coloured threads on everyone's pockets. Otherwise, we know everyone's names and can distinguish one from another."

Reema piped in, "Even we can somehow identify them from their faces, now. Because however tiny these beings may be but there is certainly some difference in their features and complexions. Everyone's voice is also somewhat distinct from the other and each person's attire differs."

"Yes, of course! On looking minutely, we can recognise them," Pammi remarked. Thereafter she exclaimed, "Reema! You do not know how over-joyed I am, in making our Chheku unite with his brothers. You people have done a great deed. Anyway, we have to help him catch up with the other brothers."

"That is fine! But since it is getting late now, I will take Teeku and make a move. We will go to Yuvraj's house, tomorrow or day after, itself, to make him meet the other dwarf brothers," Reema assured.

"If you agree with me, allow Teeku to stay over here, today. Both the brothers will be nostalgically talking of old times," Pammi suggested.

"Well, that is fine! What say Teeku! Will you stay here itself, for the night?" asked Reema.

"Yes Didi! Both of us will sleep together and chat away to glory! Moreover, you live closeby," Teeku instantly responded.

"Okay then, bye Aunty! Pammi, I will make a move," said Reema, taking leave.

* * *

Aunty and Pammi talked incessantly to both the brothers, late into the night.

Aunty was quick in asking Teeku, "How did you manage to reach Reema's house?"

And Teeku narrated the entire story. Soon after, she asked about Yuvraj plus Shamim and Teeku went on giving the details.

Chheku piped in, "Even I am going to drop in at Yuvraj Bhaiya's house and meet everyone. Wow! This is certainly a dream coming true!"

That is when Teeku asked, all of a sudden, "Aunty! Where is Pammi Didi's Papa?"

Both mother and daughter were astonished at Teeku asking such a question.

"You are aware that every child has a Mummy and Papa?" Pammi affirmed.

"Yes, of course! Gauri Ma had told us that they do not have a child but there are children in other homes, for certain. Most of the Mummies and Papas have children," Teeku revealed.

"Hey, you seem to know a lot! Pammi's father has gone far away to the ocean. He drives a ship which is a large ocean-going vessel propelled by engines," said Aunty.

"What is an ocean? And what is an ocean-going ship?" Teeku asked innocently.

"Oh, how should I explain to you? As far as the eye can see, there is water flowing all over the ocean. Really deep water! There is even more water in the oceans than all the land in this world put together. Just as cars are driven on roads these ocean-going ships are steered in water. These vessels carry various kinds of goods to distant places. And also carry men from one country to another," Aunty explained simply.

"Country! What are these countries?" asked Teeku, deeply interested by now.

"Oh Child! What should I say about what a nation is!" mused Aunty. "Right in the beginning, God had created the entire earth as one unit. No line was drawn anywhere but people like us partitioned the land and usurped it for our individual factions. Those very tracts of soil were named as countries by us. The boundary of every nation was fixed, and governed by the dictates of only its citizens. The residents of every country consider their nation to be far better and more genuine than the other. Mostly every country solely thinks about themselves, their progress, the comfort of its residents and their prosperity, even if they have to milk the people of other countries for this feat. Anyway, you will not able to grasp much," Aunty concluded.

"Certainly, these are very complicated matters. I fail to understand them. But then, these nations would be living peacefully within their boundaries," asked Teeku naively.

"Oh, where are they contented and at ease? These countries continue to war and fight with each other. They even ruin lives and assets of each other, constantly.

It is dreadful when you think of the bombs they have manufactured, which kill people and bring destruction. But probably for their own self-interest, some nations also help others and boast of their longlasting friendship. These are all political moves and you will not be able to understand them. Well, forget it. I am feeling sleepy now," said Aunty, winding up the conversation.

Aunty and Pammi lay down after switching off the light. Pammi was amazed at these tiny beings' concern about such complex matters. She kept thinking about them for very long.

At this end, Teeku and Chheku continued to whisper amongst themselves.

* * *

It was decided over the phone, next day, that all of them would gather at Yuvraj's farm-house. That is where all the dwarf brothers would meet each other and a plan to search for the other brothers would be chalked out. Everyone would be instantly informed if another phone call was received in the meanwhile.

All the girlfriends and Shamim took along the lovable dwarfs and reached Yuvraj's farm-house between ten to eleven o' clock, on Sunday. Pammi had also accompanied Reema. The dwarf brothers were thrilled to meet Chheku and went out to play.

Reema introduced Pammi to all the friends.

Yuvraj responded warmly, "We welcome Pammi to the 'Club' set up for finding the dwarf brothers. Everyone had a hearty laugh at this remark. Soon after, they talked of serious matters as to how the rest of the four brothers should be found.

Shamim spoke up, "Another brilliant idea has struck me. Our washer-woman goes to many houses in the neighbourhood. Just as a dwarf brother has chanced upon our house it is possible that another lovable dwarf is also somewhere in this vicinity. We can try to find out through her whether another of these dwarfs is living nearby."

"And how is that?" asked Yuvraj, eager to know the plan.

"Look, I am going to tell the washer-woman, that she should get 'Dwarf Brothers' written behind the collar of my white shirt, where these people make the distinctive mark of all houses. Or else I will write it myself with their special ink. Thereafter, the washer-woman will give this shirt to every person's house, in turns," said Shamim, giving the details.

"And then what?" Reema intervened.

"First she will give the shirt, and then go back to the same house in a short while. And reveal that by mistake Shamim's shirt has come into their pile of clothes. When they get the stack of washed clothes, then showing the mark of Shamim's shirt on which Dwarf Brothers would be written, she will point out that this shirt belongs to him. And insist that this is the symbol which indicates that Shamim is the owner of these clothes. In case there is a dwarf in anyone's house, he will keenly ask about that mark or else casually say, 'Yes, of course! It is fine! You can take the shirt!' And not pay much heed to the matter," Shamim concluded.

"Why would the washer-woman agree to go ahead with this exercise?" asked Yuvraj.

"I say, brother! She will be paid to take this course of action," explained Shamim.

"I do not expect to achieve much by this scheme but there is certainly no harm in following this plan. It is great if we can find some dwarf and at least we would have made another concentrated effort in this direction," Yuvraj opined.

Ruksana concluded, "It is final, Shamim! You work on this plan of action, and we will think of something else in the meantime."

That is when Yuvraj gave his point of view, "Look! We have already searched for all the brothers on this side of the canal. It is possible that some brother would have floated to the other bank or not have drifted down in the canal's water at all. Groping in the dark, he would have landed at someone else's house on the other side. We ought to look for them on the other shore also."

"Yes, of course! Yuvraj is correctly appraising the situation," Ruksana said.

"So why don't we do this, that Shamim and Yuvraj take the sniffer dogs, once again. Going to the other side of the canal, they show all the houses to these dogs. Probably we can get a clue by this exercise," Reema commented.

"Oh, no! There are a cluster of tiny hovels of small tenant farmers and workers in the village, at distant intervals on the other side of the canal. Most of the dwellings have country dogs, as well. They also wander around in the open. The instant those dogs spot our sniffer dogs they will bark on top of their voices, bringing utter chaos. What say can our dogs have in such a scene," Yuvraj had a different perspective.

"What should we do, in that case?" asked a confused Reema.

"Well, we can do this . . ." an idea cropped up in Shamim's mind. "Yuvraj and I can venture to the other side, ourselves and trace out some news of the dwarf brothers. We will come back by the time it is evening. Meanwhile, all of you can have a rollicking time, here. What do you say, Yuvraj?"

"It is fine with me. But how will we find them there?" asked Yuvraj.

"Look, I have an amazing idea. The dwarf brothers thoroughly weed out the wild grass of the garden or field of whichever house they stay in. Invariably, all the people living on that side have either fields or lawns. The two of us will carefully inspect the fields and gardens, as we walk ahead. We can expect to spot the lovable dwarfs right there, where the tiny fields and small gardens have sparse or no wild grass in comparison to the neighbouring ones," said Shamim.

"All right! Come on then, let us make a move," said Yuvraj, agreeing to the proposal.

* * *

Soon after, Shamim and Yuvraj set out. On reaching close to the canal, they minutely observed every single garden and field. More than one and a half hours passed by in this process, but they could not find any field or lawn which was absolutely free of wild weeds.

They went off to a small tea shop in the village, to laze around for a while. In this way they could eat some snacks and have a bit of tea while sitting there, and even talk to some local people on this pretext. Probably they would be able to find some clue of the dwarfs' whereabouts.

Other people were busy chatting amongst themselves, as they sat on the benches there. Yuvraj and Shamim keenly listened to their talk.

At that very moment, two other men walked in, "Bhai! Quickly make two cups of tea for us, as well. We have to reach there fast before the sermon of Baba ji starts."

Thereafter one of them revealed, "Yaar! Since so long, I have been going to Baba ji's hut to hear the religious discourse. Having always reached before time, I have meticulously cleaned up Baba's dwelling since he is an easy-going person! His stuff would be carelessly scattered about the place, all the time. Since

the past so many days, I am seeing that all of Baba's belongings, his books and other trivial things are arranged systematically. It is strange because I have never seen Baba keeping his possessions in order. I do not know who painstakingly cleans up the entire hut before I can reach the place! Not a single piece of paper or scrap can be spotted, littered around."

The other man supported his observation, "Yes! Yes! I have also paid attention to this amazing change."

Shamim and Yuvraj continued to carefully listen to their conversation, and both of them looked at each other with meaningful glances.

"Bhaiya! Where is this hut of Baba ji? Can we also listen to his sermon?" asked Yuvraj, pretending to be interested.

"Why not? His doors are wide open for everyone. His sermon takes place from three to four o'clock in the evening, every single day. Spiritual questions are also asked and then there is *kirtan* (singing of devotional songs). We people are going there, right away," said one of the men.

"Then, both of us will also accompany you," Shamim confirmed.

"Yes, of course! Let us have some tea and then we will make a move," one of them responded.

Both Yuvraj and Shamim whispered to each other, that most probably some dwarf brother would be quietly cleaning up Baba ji's hut, in this meticulous fashion.

When all four of them reached Baba ji's hut, he was sitting on the special seat, designed for him. Casual conversation was going on and there was some time left for the religious sermon to start. Gradually other people streamed in, with the passage of time.

Shamim and Yuvraj eagerly looked all around the hut. They noticed the small patch of garden was neatly manicured indeed.

"Shamim, just have a look! How spotless is this small garden. I have a strong intuition that there is definitely some dwarf brother, putting up here," Yuvraj enthused.

Shamin nodded his head in agreement. In a short while, the sermon began and both of them keenly listened to the discourse. They were both liking the speech. Some spiritual questions were asked after the sermon and about half an hour of *bhajans* and kirtans went on, thereafter. *Prasad* (food offered to an idol) of fruits, sweetmeats and so on brought by *bhaktas* was distributed to everyone, simultaneously. Soon after, people left gradually but Shamim and Yuvraj stayed back.

Baba ji asked, "Why children! Don't you both have to go home?"

"Baba! We will also go home but we need to talk to you, alone," Yuvraj explained.

"That is fine! Come inside. What is it that you have to discuss?" said Baba, keen to know the truth.

Both of them stepped into Baba's hut where everything had been systematically kept and the floor was so very spick and span.

"Yes, now speak up," urged Baba.

Yuvraj felt it was better to be straightforward, "Baba! We have come here in search of some dwarf brother."

"Oh! I see! So that is the case! Yes Bhai! A lovable dwarf had certainly landed here," Baba disclosed.

"Where is he?" asked an eager Shamim.

"I will let you know but you both must tell me about yourselves, first. I have promised the dwarf that I will not talk to anyone about him apart from those who have some information about his brothers," said Baba, with sincerity.

"Yes Baba! That is why we wanted to talk to you in isolation. There are nine dwarf brothers staying with our friends, as of now. What we want is to thoroughly scout for all the thirteen lovable dwarfs and make them re-unite, at least once! Then we will do exactly what these tiny beings want. And certainly all the dwarf brothers want that other people should not get to know of their presence," Yuvraj revealed.

"Yes, that is precisely the truth! Bhai! When this child-like dwarf whose name is Barhoo, walked into my hut, I became very fond of him. He would not trouble me in any way. Merrily he did all his chores himself and moreover attended to my needs, as well. He is the one who has weeded out the entire wild grass of my small garden," Baba raved about his virtues.

"Baba, that is right! All these brothers are very hard working and so good," Shamim enthused.

Baba nodded his head in agreement and called out to Barhoo who stepped out of a box kept in a corner. He had tied on a small *dhoti* (a piece of cloth worn round the lower body, one end of which passes between the legs and is tucked in behind) and wore a *kurta* (a collarless shirt) on top, plus a *tilak* (secterian mark made with saffron or sandal) marked his forehead. Amazingly, he looked exactly like a small Baba ji.

Looking at this dress up of his, Yuvraj exclaimed, "Oh! He is absolutely like a small replica of Baba ji."

Everyone had a hearty laugh at this remark.

Barhoo spoke excitedly, "Truly, the two of you have brought great good news for me. I was quietly listening to your conversation while sitting in the box. Where are my other brothers?"

"Actually, they live separately in different houses. But are staying over at my house, till today evening," Yuvraj explained.

"In that case, Baba! Shall I go to meet my brothers," Barhoo asked for Baba's permission.

"Beta, if this is what God wishes, you ought to definitely go and visit them! But you must come back to Baba, at times. My heart will be overjoyed to meet you," said Baba, emotional at the parting.

"So can we take him along?" Shamim was thrilled.

"Do what the two of you and he wants!" said Baba, giving in.

Yuvraj picked up Barhoo and safely stashed him in his pocket. Soon after, he did *namaskar* (respectfully saluted) to Baba ji and thanked him.

"May everybody prosper!" said Baba, blessing them. And then, the two of them headed homewards.

* * *

On reaching home they found everybody eagerly waiting for both of them. The dwarf brothers also walked into the drawing-room, in the meantime.

"What happened?" Ruksana asked, impatient to know the truth.

"The mission was successful!" exclaimed Yuvraj.

Saying so, Yuvraj took out Barhoo from his pocket and safely placed him on the floor. Everybody present could not control their laughter as they admired his tiny dhoti, kurta and tilak. He was instantly surrounded by all the brothers. The gang hugged him initially, and then making him stand in the centre, they danced in joyous abandon,

The small tiny Baba arrived
And into everyone's hearts dived.
Baba ji! Baba ji!
Give us prasad, Baba ji!

Though everyone present loved their merry dancing and singing, the girls were in a hurry to go back home. It was decided that at least the brothers should be allowed to stay on and hearing this, all the lovable dwarfs were thrilled. Thereafter everyone took leave from each other and left for their respective homes. That evening, the dwarf brothers were to have a gala time at Yuvraj's house, late into the night. Yuvraj asked Kisnoo to prepare a delicious sweet-dish for everyone. Soon after Kisnoo baked a great chocolate cake pudding for the team.

However the small Baba refused to eat, "Bhai! I am not going to have a dish which has eggs."

Kisnoo smiled on seeing his attitude which was so much like Baba ji's, but his other dwarf brothers were very impressed by his devoutly religious behaviour.

Yuvraj rang up Shamim two days later, "Bhai! I feel...it is possible that the other lovable dwarfs would also be putting up somewhere across the canal. The scheme centred around the washer-woman or washer-man has flopped. No one in the neighbourhood paid any attention to the mark inked behind the collar of my shirt."

"In that case, what should we do?" asked Shamim.

"We should quickly go over to the other side once again, to look for them. Ruksana Aapa also thinks the same," Yuvraj opined.

"It is final. We will take an off from school, tomorrow. You come to my house quite early in the

morning. We will venture to the other side of the canal to search for the other three brothers," said Shamim, agreeing to the plan.

"Right!" said Yuvraj, instantly.

Shamim reached Yuvraj's house at eleven o' clock in the morning, next day. The dwarf brothers were busy playing outdoors. All of them were in a joyous mood but were simultaneously tending to the garden's chores, as well. They had transformed Yuvraj's garden patch into a lush flower garden.

* * *

When Shamim said hello to the lovable dwarfs, one of them responded, "Hello, hello, hello, feast on *laddus* (a kind of sweet) and *pedas*, galore."

Another sang,

"Shamim Bhai came
but did not get a thing, what a shame."

Shamim smiled on hearing their mischievous songs. He had carried some peanuts to munch on the way. Taking out the packet from his pocket, he sang,

"Shamim Bhai dropped in
Getting peanuts along with him."

All the dwarf brothers, delightedly sang after him,

"Shamim Bhai dropped in
Getting peanuts along with him."

Shamim ended up giving the full packet to them. The whole gang pounced on the packet. They held each peanut with both their hands, nibbled at the covering with their teeth, took out the peanut from its shell and relished them. Shamim found their eating peanuts in this particular manner, very amusing.

That is precisely when one dwarf brother told another, "Leave some peanuts for Shamim Bhai and Yuvraj Bhai, also! All of you have attacked the peanuts like absolute gluttons."

"No, no! You all can eat all of the nuts. Yuvraj and I are going to the village which lies on the other side of the canal to scout for your other brothers. We will buy some more peanuts on the way," Shamim replied.

Yet another of the lovable dwarfs hummed,

"Shamim Bhai is good, for certain
He will find out the children, it is certain."

Soon enough, Shamim went in to Yuvraj's room, laughing all the while.

* * *

Crossing the canal, Shamim and Yuvraj reached the other village. Now they began to inspect the fields, once again, to see if the wild weeds had been properly weeded out from the crops. After wandering aimlessly for quite some time they finally found a field by the edge of a footpath, where the wild weeds were very sparse. Both of them closely scrutinised the patch of land by going round and round.

"Have a look Shamim! There are absolutely no weeds growing wild over this patch of fertile soil. Even the leaves of that field have not even eaten by insects. This field stands apart due its lush green crops, whereas the neighbouring ones have been profusely attacked by wild growth. Just ask these workers tilling the soil, who is the owner of this field."

Shamim reached the farmers working there and asked one of them, "Bhai ji! Can you tell us who this patch of land belongs to?"

"Why Babu, do you have any particular work?"

"Nothing special but that field is immaculately clean and appears somewhat different from the others. We are keen to ask its master how he has managed to keep it so exceptionally clean," replied Shamim.

"Yes, of course! You are absolutely correct, Babu! Even we people are astonished to see his field, particularly when he does not do any work in the daytime. God knows how his field becomes so spick and span, in the middle of the night. There is no sign of any wild weeds or pests and red ants."

Right then, the worker working along with him disclosed, "That field belongs to Kashi Nath who lives in the house situated at one end of the village."

"On which side of the village," asked Shamim.

"The lone corner house which lies eastwards, belongs to him only. Ask about Kashi Nath's house from anyone in the village," said the worker, giving directions.

"All right, Bhaiya! Thank you!" said Shamim, grateful for this piece of information.

Both of them headed towards the village. Asking about the location there, they reached Kashi Nath's house, straightaway. The door of the house was closed. When both of them peeped in slightly from the gap, they could see wheat laid out in the courtyard, on which three dwarf brothers were working.

"Hey! These dwarfs are cleaning up the wheat!" exclaimed Yuvraj.

"Yes! Yes! But look closely. Straps have been put around their necks, as if they are tied down, most of the time," said a concerned Yuvraj.

Precisely at that point of time, a woman stepped out from inside the house and came to the courtyard. She shouted, "Oh lazy bums! Do your work as fast as possible. I have go and get the wheat ground tomorrow morning itself, or else you will get no meals at night."

Hearing this threat, Shamim and Yuvraj were speechless. It seemed tough to release the dwarfs from the bondage of this particular house.

Shamim opined, "Well, those who are forcibly making them slog like servants, why would they easily hand the dwarfs over to us?"

"Exactly!" Yuvraj agreed.

They were about to knock at the door when the sound of a dog barking from within, could be heard. Probably the dog had sensed their presence. He continued to bark at the top of his voice.

"Who is it, there?" screamed the woman

Shamim and Yuvraj thought that it was best to slip away from this place. Both of them walked a bit further and discussed the matter. They decided to come there, the very next day, when there would be no one at home. Stealthily taking away the dwarf brothers, at that point of time would be just perfect, they mused.

They came back from there.

"Shamim! We will go there again, tomorrow morning and sneak into the house when there is nobody else inside. The two of us will have to make arrangements for dealing with the dog, as well," opined Yuvraj.

"Yes, this will be the correct course of action. But we must not tell anyone about their condition, as yet. Hearing about their pitiable state, everyone will be dejected," Shamim remarked.

"All right!" agreed Yuvraj.

* * *

Sharp at nine-thirty in the morning, Shamim and Yuvraj reached close to Kashi Nath's house, next day.

Probably Kashi Nath had gone out somewhere but his wife was definitely inside. The two of them had come fully prepared to deal with the dog, that day. Both of them strolled a bit further down and patiently began waiting for Kashi Nath's wife to go out. Somehow they had come to know that no one else lived in that house apart from Kashi Nath and his wife. Their daughter had been married and lived at her father-in-law's house.

Shamim and Yuvraj did not have to wait for long. Just a little later, Kashi Nath's wife stepped out, carrying five *sers* of wheat on her head. She shoved the dog inside and locking the door from outside, set out to get the grains of wheat ground.

Both the friends came closer to the house and the dog began to bark once again. They flung a piece of meat inside the house. Soon enough, the dog was absorbed in eating the fleshy meat. Quickly, Shamim and Yuvraj took the support of a pole and jumped into the courtyard. They gave some more pieces of meat and bones to the dogs who began feasting on them.

At this end, the three dwarf brothers who were busy cleaning some more wheat, looked at these two friends in astonishment.

"Hey children! We people are your friends. Your other brothers stay with us and all of them are very happy. But we saw that that these people do not treat you properly," said Shamim, out of concern.

"It is one's own destiny!" answered one of them, matter of factly.

"You all must come along with us, fast!" urged Yuvraj.

"But how would we know that our brothers are staying with both of you?" asked one the dwarfs.

"Look, the dwarfs have told us that you are thirteen brothers in all and your names are Eku, Doku, Teeku, Chaaru and so on," Yuvraj clarified.

"That's enough! We have figured out that our brothers are actually living with you people. Let's go. We are going to accompany you," confirmed the three dwarfs.

Soon after, Yuvraj stashed two of the dwarfs in his pocket while Shamim kept one of them. Cleverly, both of them put a piece of cake in front of the dog, for him to relish. Thereafter, they leapt over the courtyard's wall and came out of the house. Speedily, the two friends headed homewards.

After walking for quite a distance, they stopped at a secluded place and taking out the dwarfs brothers from their pockets, made them stand up. Shamim and Yuvraj cut the leashes strapped around their necks, so that their brothers would not be pained on looking at their miserable state.

When their straps were cut open, the lovable dwarfs smiled and heaved a sigh of relief at being freed. The three of them went on to caress their delicate necks with their hands.

Yuvraj looked at them lovingly and asked, "Well! What are your names?"

One of them spoke up, "My name is Novun, his name is Gyarhu and that one's name is Terhu."

"And my name is Yuvraj and his is Shamim Bhai," said Yuvraj, introducing himself and Shamim.

"The two of you are so very good!" exclaimed the dwarfs.

Soon after Shamim asked, "How did the three of you manage to reach there, at the same time? Did you all not flow away with the canal's current?"

"No!" said, one of the three dwarfs. "Actually, we did not fall into the gushing water. Rather we were scattered on the banks there. Alarmed at the turn of events, we frantically began calling out to each other in the pitch dark. The others did not answer back but the

three of us groped in the dark, and ended up uniting with each other. After waiting for some time at that spot to catch up with the other brothers, we caught each other's hands and set out on the gravelled path leading to this village. As soon as we neared the village, the sound of barking dogs could be heard. And we ended up hiding behind a shrub, frightened of the impending danger."

"And then what?" said Shamim, deeply interested by now.

"Soon after, when barking of the dogs reduced a bit, we tiptoed ahead even slower, without making the slightest sound. The three of us had managed to cross just a few houses, when another dog could be heard barking, right then. The three of us sneaked into the house by crawling through a drain. However, on looking around we found that four elders and four children were fast asleep in the verandah. We discussed amongst ourselves and decided that it was not proper to stay on since there were so many people living there. It was almost impossible to stay here, secretly in hiding. We ended up crawling out of the same drain. Then both of us sighted a lonesome house at one end of the village. We looked at each other meaningfully and entered by crawling in through the drain of that house. We spotted just two people sleeping here and found this house safe enough to lodge in," said one of the dwarfs, detailing the course of events.

"All right! What happened next?" probed Yuvraj.

"There were sacks of straw stacked there in the courtyard. We hid in them and somehow passed the long night. But right in the morning, the dog of that house stared at the sacks and began barking on top

of his voice. The master came out and as soon as he removed one of the sacks, he saw the three of us hiding. Astonished, he asked the dog to be silent, and picked us up."

"Hey! From where have such tiny dwarfs arrived," the master of the house, asked his wife, utterly amazed.

The wife also stepped out and was taken aback, "What sort of wonders, are they! Leave aside seeing such beings, I have never even heard of them."

"So what should we do with the trio?" asked the husband.

"We can certainly get good money if we sell them," the wife replied greedily.

"No! No! Do not sell us! Earlier we used to also live in a farmer's house. Laboriously we did whatever task of the house and fields, we could possibly do. The three of us are going to do all your work, as well. You just let us stay on at your house and do not tell anyone about our presence," pleaded Terhu.

"The three of you are so very tiny! What chores will you do?" asked the master.

"We will make the rats infesting your house and granary flee. Weeding out the wild grass growing in the fields, we will rid them of harmful pests. The three of us will thoroughly clean your grain, and keep your cows and buffaloes happy by massaging them. We will wholeheartedly attend to whatever other errand you ask us to do," promised Novun.

"It is fixed. We will keep them for the time being. In case they do not work well, we can sell them off," the master's wife suggested.

"If you say so, we can let them stay on, as of now," said her husband, giving in.

"We continued living there in this fashion and worked hard to attend to their needs. The husband and wife felt that we might flee in the darkness. Therefore we were leashed with straps at night because we were not going to step out in the broad daylight, for sure," disclosed Gyarhu.

"What sorts of strange people exist in this world?" fumed Yuvraj.

* * *

Yuvraj and Shamim reached the farm-house by afternoon. When the lovable dwarfs came to know that the rest of their three brothers had also arrived, a mood of rejoicing took over. All the brothers danced together in joyous abandon. Kisnoo cooked lentils-rice, *kheer* (a dish of rice boiled in milk with sugar), *puri* (a small round cake of unleavened wheat flour, deep-fried in ghi or oil) and made *raita* (chopped cucumbers or other vegetables pickled in curds) for everyone. On that day the dwarfs insisted on eating in leaf platters, as they had once eaten earlier.

Kisnoo went and broke leaves. The entire gang sat on the floor and thoroughly relished the kheer, puri, raita and lentils-rice. And they nostalgically talked about the good old days.

That is when Teeku asked Terhu, "I have heard that the people of the house you stayed in, used to tie straps around your necks and kept you bound. And made the three of you slog and forcibly work for them."

"In fact, we are not scared of hard work but the way those people treated was not good. The master and his wife did not even trust us. For that very reason we

were bound and leashed at night so that we may not run away at night," explained Terhu.

"So, the three of you quietly tolerated their atrocities?" asked a bewildered Teeku.

"What else could we do? But Gyarhu took out his irritation on them, in his own distinctive way," Terhu added.

"Is that so! What did Gyarhu do?" asked a curious Teeku.

Terhu rambled on, "One fine day, the wife of that farmer was fasting. She cooked lentils and rice for the farmer and keeping them in a small pan, went to have a bath herself. Precisely then, Gyarhu added a handful of salt to the lentils and rice, and thoroughly mixed it. Soon enough, we were thrilled just by thinking of the showdown which was about to take place between the husband and wife.

When the farmer sat down to have lunch in the afternoon, he spat out, the instant he had put a morsel in his mouth, 'Oh gosh! You have put so much salt to the lentils,' he fumed.

'No that is not the truth. I had added the right amount of salt to the dish of lentils,' his wife retaliated.

'Really. Why don't you taste a bit,' the husband thundered.

'How can I possibly do so? I am fasting today,' she retorted instantly.

'Oh! Since you are on fast you wanted that I should also not be eating anything? Why! Is that the reason of adding so much salt to the lentils? Otherwise such an excessive sprinkling of salt is not possible, even by mistake,' the husband shot back.

'What sort of weird matters, you harp upon?

Probably the salt I added to the dish would be slightly more!' the wife tried to explain.

'A bit more? Purposely you have cooked lentils and rice which taste like poison! You do not want me to eat my meal because you have also not had food today,' the husband shouted on top of his voice.

'Do not eat if you do not wish to! In any case, you do not relish any dish which I have cooked with my own hands,' the wife answered back.

Thereafter, the two continued to bicker for a long time. Whereas we secretly enjoyed their heated quarrel," said Terhu, giving the details.

"But you ended up wasting all the lentils and rice," quipped Teeku.

"Why was it ruined? The master and his wife fed that preparation of lentils and rice to the cow! And actually the cow really enjoyed eating the salted dish of lentils and rice," Terhu clarified.

"And you must also listen to the prank, Novun played," Terhu added.

"Yes, what did he do?" asked Teeku.

"One fine day we were given old wheat which was infested with weevils, to clean. We were asked to pick out the weevils along with the waste particles from the grains of wheat," lamented Terhu.

"And then what?" asked Teeku.

"Oh Bhai! It is not an easy task to remove crawling weevils. In fact, so many of the weevils would crawl all over us and we would feel a strange tingling sensation. Once, Novun shut in a large number of living weevils in a paper envelope," Terhu went on narrating the incident.

"Then, what did he do with them?" Teeku probed.

"Avoiding everyone's eyes, he stealthily left those weevils on the charpoy of the farmer and his wife, in the evening. When the farmer and his wife went to sleep at night, the weevils began creeping over them, just a little later. And some of them ended up worming into their clothes. Both of them got up with a start, scratching all over their itching body while we quietly laughed, watching this hilarious scene. Soon after, the two of them took their entire bedding outside and shook it vigorously but still some weevils continued to latch on," said Terhu, giving the details.

"The farmer's wife complained to him, the next day, 'Look dear! The two sacks of wheat which had been left over from last year, have been abundantly attacked by weevils which are slowly spreading over the entire house. In fact, you had seen last night that they had even crept into our beds.'

'What should I do, in that case?' asked the bewildered farmer.

'Taking both the sacks on a bullock cart, go and sell them to the person who makes fodder for animals. Or else the weevils infesting that wheat are going to make it extremely annoying for us to stay in our own house,' the wife grumbled.

'Okay, it is decided,' he said.

The farmer loaded the sacks on to a bullock cart and took them, in the afternoon itself. In this manner we were saved from the ugly task of picking out weevils'," said Terhu, ending the story.

Hearing this amusing incident, all the lovable dwarfs laughed heartily for a long time and applauded Novun for this scheme of his.

Yuvraj helped these three brothers to make friends

with the dogs, the next day. By this time, the whole gang of friends had been informed of all the dwarf brothers being found.

The entire team—Reema, Radha, Sukanya, Pammi, Ruksana, Shamim and others reached Yuvraj's farm-house, the very next evening. There was a great deal of dancing-singing and merry making to celebrate the re-union of the lovable brothers.

Thereafter, everyone sat down and decided that these dwarf brothers be allowed to stay together in Yuvraj's house, as long as they wished. Afterwards, whoever of the dwarfs wanted to go to whichever person's house, could do so. The entire gang made a programme of visiting Yuvraj's farm-house again on a Sunday so that they could have a grand party, at leisure. In this way, all the lovable dwarfs ended up staying at Yuvraj's set up.

* * *

Teeku expressed his gratitude to Yuvraj on Saturday itself, "You folks reunited our family of thirteen brothers and all of you are so very good! We brothers are going to dote on you forever but we are feeling very sleepy, at the moment. Probably our hibernation period has arrived."

"Hibernation period! What on earth is that?" asked a puzzled Yuvraj.

"We just know this fact, that all of us go into deep sleep at the same time. Moreover, we go off to sleep for a long span of time, maybe three to four months. We do not know whether we can even breathe during that specific period. But thereafter, we begin to live our life anew at some other place," explained Teeku.

Yuvraj was astounded on hearing this revelation. Bewildered, he asked, "What do you folks want us to do?"

"Tomorrow itself, you all must order for a somewhat big bottle gourd for all of us. Taking out the seeds embedded within and seating us inside, you have to close the plant. Thereafter you must plant the gourd in a distant field of some farmer. God willing, quite a

big sapling will sprout from that bottle gourd of ours, once again. And probably another cycle of our lives will start, at some other site," Teeku detailed.

Astounded, Yuvraj continued to listen to his wonderful talk.

That is when Panchu mused, "Let's see, where we folks land at that point of time? And in which manner this mundane world treats us. Probably we are going to hardly ever experience such great times as the ones spent with all of you in this life cycle."

Saatu became emotional, "The intense love you all showered on us, the way all of you cared for us, and the effort your gang put in to re-unite us, in spite of so many hurdles, would seldom be done by anyone else!"

Dassu piped in, "All of us really liked this fact that you all did not let out our secret to anyone else; and that too just for this reason so that we do not have to bear any hardship."

Yuvraj became sentimental on hearing such loving words from the dwarf brothers, "Whatever we did was as per our wishes. We found you people to be very good and lovable. Above all, we came across a new sort of happiness by associating with your lot. Very well! I am going to inform everyone about you folks going into such prolonged sleep."

Yuvraj rang up the entire gang and narrated the whole story. All of them said that they ought to do exactly what these dwarf brothers wanted. The very next day, everyone reached Yuvraj's farm-house to bid farewell to the dwarfs. Unable to sleep, all the friends passed the entire night in sadness, pondering over the strange wonders of life.

The team of friends quckly reached Yuvraj's farm-house, the next day. Everyone's hearts were heavy but what could be done! Probably the fixed principles of creation work like this, they consoled themselves.

In quick succession, everyone lovingly kissed the dwarf brothers. Fondly kissing everyone, all the dwarf brothers also took leave. Slowly the eyes of the lovable dwarfs were closing because they were so drowsy.

Shamim was sent off to the bazaar to look for and get a fairly large bottle gourd. Kisnoo called everyone for lunch but no one felt like eating that day because the dwarf brothers were also on a total fast.

Keeping it on a rickshaw, Shamim got quite a huge gourd. Soon after, Yuvraj and Shamim jointly cut off a slight portion from the top of the gourd and picked out the seeds lying within.

The dwarf brothers were going into deep sleep and even their breaths were becoming faint. After discussing the matter, everyone decided that the dwarfs should be immediately closed in the bottle gourd.

Precisely then, one of the dwarf brothers pleaded in a very feeble voice, "Take off all our clothes before putting us in the gourd. We would like to go to the next cycle in our natural state."

Yuvraj and Shamim took off the clothes of all the dwarf brothers and posited them in the gourd, one by one. Afterwards, the gourd was shut tightly from the top.

Sitting on the floor, everyone began praying for their future well-being and sobbed. Whereas Yuvraj and Shamim carefully put the gourd in a big sack, before the evening set in.

At five o'clock in the evening, Shamim told all the girls that they should go back to their respective homes. In a short while, Yuvraj and he were to set off with the gourd. Wherever they felt it was suitable, they would sow the plant on spotting some lush field. What would happen later, depended on God's will.

Weeping softly, the girls headed back to their individual homes.

* * *

When it was dark, Shamim and Yuvraj took turns to lift the sack and walked towards the fields. After trudging for three to four hours, both of them sneaked into a field, at around eleven o' clock in the night. There, they dug up a rather big pit with a small shovel they had got along. Soon after, both of them carefully lowered the gourd into the pit and thoroughly covered it with soil. Sitting at that spot for some time, both of them prayed for the safety of the dwarf brothers. Thereafter, they wearily walked back with heavy steps. Shamim slept at Yuvraj's house for that night.

The next day, Yuvraj rang up the old Uncle and told him in detail about the lovable dwarfs going into 'hibernation' in this strange manner.

The Uncle also ended up praying for their well-being and reflected, "The laws of nature are fixed. But I am relieved that you people did whatever was humanly possible for their welfare. It was truly fortunate that both of you took the two dwarfs from our house to their brothers. All of you must come to meet your Uncle and Aunty whenever you have spare time," saying these words, he began weeping softly and disconnected the phone.

* * *

"Although we had sworn that the matter of the lovable dwarfs would be confined to our group of friends and

not a word would be leaked to anyone else. But I have broken that oath after two full years of being separated from them. Moreover, whichever part of the dwarf brothers' tale I knew, I narrated to a known author and insisted that he write every incident, sequence wise. He is the one who has given this distinctive shape to the entire story.

What could I do, I just couldn't stop myself! I am ready to bear whatever punishment my friends give me for breaking my promise."

A well-wisher of the dwarf brothers—

'Reema'

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